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THE SCENE IS ENGLAND

Author of the B.B.C. series of talks

“FOR FARMERS ONLY”

THE SCENE IS ENGLAND

By
JOHN SUSSEX
(JOHN MORGAN)



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Compiled and Edited
by
ADÈLE LEZARD

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SPRING

Who blames the daffodil when she leans back her golden head at high noon, knowing full well that young Spring is bending over her? Not I.

About his shoulders he wears a cloak of blue sky. His shoe-buckles are already dusty with the pollen of primroses. The children have slipped a bunch of white violets into his hand.

A little bird pipes a new tune from under the lilac bough arched over its head.

ON the morning that first you spy a blackbird piping clear notes from the topmost bough of an apple tree, you can take it that the wood behind you is already carpeted with intimations of a spring as inspiring as any that have been.

So it was. The impulse rose in me to go and see. And, sure enough, patches of young green, the wrinkled leafiness of new primrose tufts thrust through the mould of past autumns' leaves, along with the dear bravery of the slender snowdrop, and the even gentler aconite. They're punctual, so the rest will be.

The partridge coveys no longer make their hurricane swoops over your head and the hedge beyond, on the thud of your footfall. They've paired; the guns must stand on their butt-ends in the corner again. A starling snatches at a moulted hen-feather in the fields for no reason at all that it can think of. All the same, it flies homewards with the white plume in its beak to reline an old nest, up under the tiles, an idea that wouldn't have entered its crazy noddle a month back.

A pair of thrushes in a hedge look on. They'll get a few sticks together presently and be content to keep the wind out with some withered grass. Meanwhile, in passing, a nodding acquaintance coquettishly makes her pert inquiries after his health. Get the early morning's vocal exercises over and both become content to share the same perch on a twig, first here, then there, for hours on end, till hunger and evening bring them down to earth again.

Hundreds of tits or buntings fly over in a flock. The whirr of the myriad wings causes a sober hen to scuttle, constitutionally unable as she seems to take in with

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an upward glance the purport of sudden, swift noises "out of the blue." I've seen her scuttle in much the same way before the zooming of a low-flying aeroplane. But stubbles are becoming few and far between for these nomadic hordes to alight upon.

The ploughs have been busy. Where the land was "balked," or "ridged" as some call it, last autumn, the double-bladed plough is already at work in my part, splitting the balks ready for the second early potato seed next month. The frosted soil falls back off the plough's gleaming breast into another ridge of deep tilth that should yield the man the bumper crop he's set his heart on. The fellows who plough the potato lands take an especial pride in their setting-out. Critics, so often eyeing them with their own hands in their pockets, can more easily find fault when two furrows have to back each other end on end, true and straight the full length of fifteen acres. Yet meadows stand in need of many showers. No winter in living memory has given sounder cause for anxiety about the coming summer's flow of springs and streams as the one now all but done with.

February's brooks are running fuller than July's. But young grass needs a good soaking before the rootlets will make a stir. Early days yet for such thoughts. Still, they're there, creeping into the minds of men who have reasons enough to recollect last summer's shortages. To pass three water-carts at work on one afternoon, as I did last week in Northamptonshire, makes one confident that the townsman will have to put up with a good many wet pavements before the countryman will admit he's satisfied.

The sight of three pheasants, all hens, only yesterday

slinking through the grey mat of dead grass and sedge to sip at the fringe of the cows' pond, because in neither ditch nor hollows in the wood could a mere beakful of water be found, explains why the kind of man I mix with shakes his head when you remind him of "the lovely day it's been"! "We shall pay for this presently." But I don't feel as far ahead as he does. March might make up for a lot of things. When he's gone home there's nearly an hour left before dark—one of the present month's few undeniable and dependable felicities—in which to saunter through first one little field and then another, or lean against a cracked and creaking gate, simply to listen to one set of creatures turning in and, more stealthily, another set of creatures turning out.

One field I make for is a poor one in some ways. In an average year it would "lie wet" most of the time. This year it's as dry as the rest. But the tufted plover and the lapwing haunt it just the same. One or two pairs prefer it for nesting. They're staying on, for the wheeling company they evidently join up with every winter have already moved away. Dusk finds them still on with their early courting. A shy start, but they've made it. Ghostly cries come out of the fading twilight, "willuch, willuch," and the bantering encouragement of her "coo-weet." Soon the hen lapwing will have picked out the site of a nest, some damp hollow scraped by her sharp toes out of the mere imprint of a horse's hoof. Then, when the eggs are lodged, the cries of courting ecstasies are converted to the shriller tones of "peewit"—danger's call. On higher grounds or even near the coasts, with coarse marsh-lands to breed upon, the curlew is another of these fascinating birds with mating notes

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that, heard again, stir up the background of a boyhood's memory. "Cur-lew," a wild cry above the wildest winds of March, or her other more bubbling note held long in the throat on some happy flight on a quieter day. Talk to me of a curlew and I'm back in the last stages of a long hike across the fells of Westmorland or in a hard winter nearly through, spent on the salt-marshes of the Essex coast.

Yes, as day dies down in February, to-morrow can be looked forward to. A few weeks from now and every limb will have its bud and every unmolested nest its egg.

A farming task left over from to-day finds the next too full. The last full moon was the winter's last. The next will light the night sky for the brides of spring.



ONE year ago, and Jane was still at the cradle stage; to-day she is toddling round. The child's merry shouts are heard here, there and everywhere about the place. She starts out on every day, adventuring. Daylight's hours and her sturdy legs just about match each other's energies. The sun has hardly faded over the top of the hill before a flushed little face, fresh from the tub, holds itself up for nearly the last kiss, and then scootles along the passage to the cot. The presence of "Pooh" is demanded; "Cinders" is summarily thrust between the sheets. A few pretexts for delay can be spotted through the window, a star never noticed before, the moon at the full in the east, a blackbird, as reluctant as Jane, pipes softly out there somewhere in the hedge's shadows, and so the day dies down. It's the child's first taste of spring.

Each day now brings a riot of surprises. Nothing that she sees peeping up through the soil has she ever seen do that sort of thing before. Yesterday, the tenderest of green shoots has become to-day the gentlest of yellow aconites.

A hundred times she scampers to and fro through the wicket-gate, shouting aloud at times, just because the birds have taken to their songs again, new songs that she, the two-year-old, has never heard before.

Wings whirl more close to her ears than mine on errands much more urgent this month than last. She stands, watching the impetuous starling to the end of its flight, and then toddles along the faint trail of yet another fantasy. Back to the wicket-gate again, a struggle with its catch, for a country child soon heeds the lesson about gates, or should do, and then, if it's your great luck as it was mine, she tumbles upon one of the great moments of her day.

"Oo, look." A fat, dimpled finger points to a flowery object at her feet. Still pointing, she calls this way and that for playmates, grown-ups, aye, and the stranger even, should he appear, to share in the discovery. A bunch of snowdrops, drooping delicately, that must have been planted by some mysterious gardener.

The "fish-man" puts his head over the gate. His finger on the latch breaks the spell. "Lookee," says the little maid. He is as shy as she is. "Aye, them be snowdrops," he says, passing on. Jane, surveying the man's back until he turns the corner, wears a look of bewilderment that he should have missed the significance of it all. Snowdrops or whatever they might be, this dainty patch of sheer loveliness had burst through

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the ground whilst she'd been standing there. Didn't he know that? A moment before, a few blades of green, a common enough sight. But now a dozen graceful blooms transforming a scene that had been empty of special interest for her! How could a man pass without wondering?

As the days come and go she catches the spirit of new things born. On the way to the shops in the town for the weekly groceries, a journey of some delight, Jane indicates a flock of "baas," and murmurs understanding of the fact that it can't be many weeks now before that particular batch of sober-looking matrons will be teased and tormented by nearly twice their number of sucking lambs.

A round of the animals in the barn is an office that is never missed, if someone can be found to take her hand. The old sow's time is "out," as the farming man says. To-night she's busy making her bed. A scrupulous examination of the straw in the pen is made, the cleanest taken in mouthfuls to the chosen corner and there knocked into shape by a paw as deft at bed-making as a Yorkshire housewife's two hands.

This shrewd old creature is a friend of Jane's, who quickly notes the special preparations. She looks up for the explanation. She feels the queer sense of expectancy the sow imparts by such a maternal concentration on her instinctive task. "To-morrow, when Jane comes down to the barn to see Mrs. Pig, she will find that ten or even twelve baby pigs have arrived in the night." She may take the information in silence, but she knows well enough what you mean. The first question the next morning will be directed to the well-being of Mrs. Pig.

This week has been full of intimations of spring. Chickens are hatching off. The lilac buds are fat and well up to time. The children ask for creature pets to nurse and play with. There may be a set-back later on. The fruit trees could do with it. But once the snowdrop and aconite have come, once the lambs "fall," nothing can shake the young spring off its stride. Jane can tell you, she could show you, just where and when it was the "back" of the winter was broken, for broken it is.



THERE is an undertow in the life of our villages that baffles the new-comer. Let such a person sponsor a project, desirable to the reforming eye, yet one which will disturb the habit of the place, and it won't be long before he is "up against it," as we say. For one thing, it's almost certain to prove a mistake in the end if one sets out to disturb the peace before one has been "hardly five minutes in the place."

Of course, a difference comes in if the innovator has "pots of money" and can afford to buy out the opposition with either jobs or largess. Or he may be able to command an especial respect having "come into the property," if it's the local estate. But against the rest of us, the family connections by marriage and blood are still a rallying-ground for the opposition's whisperings. Take counsel from the wrong quarter and the other side will undermine the most well-intended of propositions until you're just sick and sorry that you ever had anything to do with it.

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Whole territories of the counties of England are as unwelcoming to the new-comer as they ever were. Villages enjoy mobilising their jealousies to wreak the unkindest effects. One has to be insensitive to a good deal to live comfortably in the country at times.

Yet there is the other side. I met it in Suffolk the other day. I never go into a village with a moment to spare but I scan its public notices. These serve as an index to its liveliness; they give some idea of what goes on there. A drama society laying itself out to tackle *Julius Caesar* is a pretty clear indication that there's at least one person about anxious to keep a head well above water. It's not a bad idea to locate the secretary in such a case. You may strike serious-mindedness without a seasoning sense of humour. But that's more likely only a measure of its revolt.

As likely as not the next place you pass through on the road caters for the more light-hearted around. The "dancing-mad" make it their rendezvous, again because some blithe personality is particularly effective with a couple of drum-sticks.

After all, there's not much apparatus available for either instruction or amusement in the village. With us it's still a question of the right person in charge, someone with enough charm or the capacity to lead, and things go with a swing. Hoardings and mere commercial boosting won't fetch us out at nights. In fact they hardly bother to spread out their nets so far. A distant cinema now and then is perhaps the younger elements' "port of call." If it wasn't for the "reglers," "The Dun Cow" at the cross-roads couldn't keep open. As it is, the landlord, still vested, by the way,

with a slight prestige, ekes out by keeping hens and a few pigs. The young people swish past him on their bicycles. The puzzle is how the brewers' profits manage to keep up so.

Glancing over a notice-board on a blacksmith's wall I read that the "Whist Drive and Dance" would be held in aid of "three sick persons in our village." A pretext possibly, but also something more than that. Misfortune among the fraternity is a communal concern. But I was to learn that this village was prepared to go farther than that. I made a halt there. A man leaning over a gate hadn't the least doubt when I questioned him which of the red roofs a little farther down the road would make me most comfortable. I went. Sitting in the kitchen was the doyen female who had "looked in" to inquire about the visitors. She'd never "stirred" out of the place, and never wanted to, "what's more." She was "Aunt Prissie" to everyone.

Not a baby was born, "not a poor soul buried," but Aunt Prissie was there to do the offices. Her tongue cracked like a sharp-shooter's barrel. What she'd "really come along about" was what "was to be done about them strangers down at the shop." "The strangers" had taken over the general stores a couple of years back. They'd come over from Bury and were just beginning to get the business round. Everybody "felt sorry for 'em." Their only child had gone to hospital that evening.

"The doctor don't seem to be able to make out what be the matter with 'un. He called this morning, but they felt obliged to send for him again, and now the child's bin taken away. The woman's nigh broken-hearted." So what was to be done about "them

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strangers down at the shop"? I stood by, in the back kitchen of my red-roofed hospitality, to observe the better side of that village life being summoned to the aid of the stricken in their midst.

A daughter took over the cleaning of their house, the man at the other shop, selling the same soaps and post-cards and haberdasheries, took his rivals in and out to the hospital and, at the last, to the inquest as well. I raised my hat to that fellow when the time came for me to take up my journey again. When the lonely pair set out on that hardest bit of the road to choose a spot for the little chap to lie in, not an eye was dry and every curious curtain was drawn in the deepest of human sympathies. They'll be no longer "them strangers" to those folk. The little mound at the foot of the square tower that looks out over the treacherous sea on which their own men set their danger-daring sails to fish, is to be the everlasting bond of a new fraternity for them, for most of the others have at least one mound to care for at the foot of the same tower.



MARCH came in like a lion right enough. A keen north-west wind drove the snow up under the eaves, meantime whistling spiteful tunes around our chimney-pots all day, giving Sunday quite a melancholy touch. It even pursued us to our own fireside like some icy ghost brushing past one's legs trying to get warm. However, the sun managed to get in the last word, flinging out from the west an unexpected, blazing intimation of tomorrow's likely weather, the first rich sunset of the year.

And when to-morrow came, the sun's forecasting proved correct. Monday was a better day. But in spite of Sunday's unkind wind the children ran in with their happy hands full of celandine (to me a plainer sister of the buttercup), and hedgerow twigs hanging thick with catkins, with which to decorate the next day's school-room.

Still, this winter has not been too harsh. Dull and sunless maybe, but open. A few warm airs about here and Mother Earth will soon give these dead days the slip. Such a season supplies lots of material for ardent correspondents to communicate through the press news of "violets flowering in December," or soon of "the first bluebell" or "the cuckoo's call." Usually there are others as ardent able to challenge the uniqueness of such claims, knowing perhaps of some still more favoured, sheltered nook, say further in the south. There is a spot our children speak about where even now primroses can be gathered by the bunch, though they tell of it with that odd air of conspiracy sometimes adopted towards "grown-ups." The crocus borders, showing up with gay distinctiveness everywhere, provide a generous display, and one feels assured that this season's crop of lambs will be the best for many a day. As for young chicks, hatching gets earlier each year. Modern "brooder" appliances and artificial incubation turn the whole business into a regular manufacturing affair. And now that "sex-linked" breeding gains more and more adherents, so that the cockerel of certain crosses can be decided upon the moment the unfortunate little fellow emerges from the shell, we are in for such an increase of the pullet and the hen as to make the penny

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new-laid egg almost inevitable before long—at least for a month or two. This should be good news to the housewife, though if a glut of eggs occurs, no doubt the art of preserving for the use or sale in scarcer, colder days will be more and more applied by poultry-keepers concerned about the larger interests of an increasingly important industry.

There seems plenty everywhere. And with the coming of new grass will come a flow of milk likely as not embarrassing enough to make many a dairy farmer scratch his head to know what to do with it all. It's a queer productive phase we're in, not knowing quite what to do with the plentiful supplies of even such good things as eggs, milk and fruit, though aware of the fact that there must be folk about who could do with them. But how to bring these things to their door at a fair price, that's the question!



ABOUT here they say "an east wind's neither good for man nor beast." That must be true enough, yet how often it is that the "reg'lar characters" of our humankind are to be met generally among just those who are obliged to earn their living working out in all winds and weathers! And what a part wind and weather plays in shaping moods and tempers; though that they should to such a doleful extent is more than likely our own fault.

But not always. Harry Thrake's widow found this to be so only this week. "What a week," she declares. Earlier in the day she must have spilt a little water on the

path from the well-bucket, which, caught by the bitter wind, froze almost as instantly. Hurrying to draw from the well again, for butter-making uses a lot of water, she slipped up, smashing her right-hand wrist. Widow Thrake's a heavy "body"! And there she is, left single-handed scarcely a year since, with a couple of cows, the garden, hens and some pigs to manage on her own. Her boy wouldn't take to farming, so he works for a builder-man.

"It just would happen when I've got all me hens sitting," was how we gathered what such a mishap means to her. She had had to climb three stiles and cross a couple of fields to come to the neighbourly help she most preferred. "And now you see if we don't hear of someone else having an accident with such weather as this 'ere about," was an emphatic remark which formed part of the comforting, mingled with the friendly bandaging.

Such a philosophy of an odd sequence in calamity is founded enough on fact to warrant it. Be that as it may, before that same day's nightfall down crashed the tall, lean spinster Pettifer of the children's sweetshop, breaking an arm on a slide the boys had made. Caution personified in all her undertakings, she had dismounted from her three-wheeled "bone-shaker" to negotiate carefully the little hill not far from her own door. Not many have seen beyond those overhanging curtains behind the self-made and painted counter, crowded with comics, novelettes and confections of the stickiest kind. Yet queer as she appears, she has won a firm claim to our concern and sympathy as we watch her pluck pitting itself daily against a most meagre circumstance.

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But to me the most irritating of farm-yard tasks on windy days, especially with the fingers numb, is to carry from stack to stall forkfuls of hay or straw. Blown this way and that, much of the feathery load, tossed and torn hither and thither, strews itself about the tidy yard, filched from the fork by a wind that strikes one as almost insolent at times. Add to this injury the amused comments of an idle looker-on from across the gate, and a tired worker at the March end of a tedious winter full of such tasks can be excused his rude retorts.

But, taking all in all, this life of the seasons' round exercises its pull over most of us at some time or other, even when we've forgotten that we ever belonged to it. That queer pull is at its work when a sudden brightening gleam of sun, breaking in upon some crowded thoroughfare, grown all too familiar, sets our hearts' longings stirring so.



I MADE a discovery or two over the week-end. The sunlight lit up a corner of England that I thought I knew well enough, but after being shown a few of the morning glories there, I remembered that I had only passed that way in the dark before. The road picked its way between two white hills, each of them on bended knee to let a lady of a stream pass by. Her long train of silver grey wound back into a far distance until it seemed little more than a shimmering streak melting away into a rare kingdom of mist and phantom towers from which she had so evidently come.

Willows and alders leaned over to whisper greetings as she passed. From the branches, lively little birds

piped over again and again the few clear notes the young season had taught them. A bunch of ducks fed out of her hand. Smiles sparkled from a thousand dancing eyes, but whether at me or at the brave strong Tudor castle set so handsomely at the chalky side of one of the obeisant hills I wasn't certain. In any case I thanked Heaven for her gracious gaities, though when I stared too long at her, shadows passed over her face like long eyelashes plying womanish arts and coquetry.

From behind a belt of dark trees a little church frowned down. It looked too sober to be taken seriously. Besides, it was only too obvious that neither the presence of a priest nor belfry had much to do with the comings and goings of the rooks even, let alone the rest of us. Rude fellows, rooks. Familiarity always breeds contempt with them. As they saw me passing, a dozen of these foppish reprobates chose the church tower from which to bawl and jeer with as much an air of custom as any roving gang of louts bumped into at a pub's corner.

Red and white cows never paused to look up from their grazing. The water meadows had young grass on them already. Withered tufts of cocksfoot and sedge would be bitten at no more. Still, it would be a while yet before a bite would be a mouthful. Early grazing is hungry grazing. The cows can keep at it all day and never feel as full as they like to before settling down to the "cudding" of it.

Men chose their settlements more suitably and neighbourly three hundred years ago than we seem to do nowadays, I thought, taking stock of the village straddling the sloping edge of the hill down to the water's edge. A lane led up to the castle-gate, from what was now a

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high-road, but was then "The Pilgrim's Way." The folk of those days must have gathered the chalk and flints for foundations and walls, timber and reeds for ceilings and roofs, within a very few steps of the sites on which they had built their dwelling-places.

The whole village was part of the landscape. A few red roofs looked a trifle uncomfortable and out of place. The weather would tone them down. One shouldn't be deceived by the mere charm of a village, 'tis true, but walls that had stood as firmly as these had let in no draughts. It was the winter they'd been built to keep out. For the rest of the year the family had used daylight for livelihood, dusk for the pot and pipe, the last gossip and the lovers' meeting.

Night kept its own secrets. But neither lamps nor candles burned much after the sun was an hour gone behind the back of the hill.

For one reason and another even a village doesn't carry on as tidily as it did. The last bus is the fullest twice a week, when it empties the pleasure-goers and shoppers at the end of the lane. But even yet the towns change faster than a good many of the villages. The very houses are obstinate. They'll take longer to fall down than many of the new, and breed such affections for their chimney-corners that they still make more friends than enemies.

The townsman from the "avenue," with its two hundred numbered bow windows of respectability, can make a holiday of a day spent gaping in a country market place. The doctor, the spinster, the butcher, the labourer, the school, each has a door through which the rest can see, at times, most of the goings-on. The day's

work may start with "a kiss for the little gal," the old man off to his hedging, the child to its class-room. It may end with "a meetun' 'long at the chapel," or the Institute. Hens may strut and peck to nobody's concern about your feet. Everyone will look the stranger over twice, everyone has time for a talk and thinks the bus can wait.

Life is not so fast with us yet that we can't hold it up for a bit. And when the sun gleams so on the face of the stream and flashes in the windows of a Kentish castle on a hill, well, business can take its own course for five minutes; one must stand still sometimes and take things in.



THINGS have been hanging fire a bit. A spell of rough weather soon upsets our calculations. Carts and tools must be kept off the sodden lands, however anxious one may be to finish up the last of the spring sowings. Wheel-tracks and hoof-marks imprint themselves indelibly on the stiffish soils, doing more harm than good.

Farmers don't like overmuch rain in March. What they are getting now is welcome enough, but "'twould have been better had it come at the proper time." A good soak in February suits country economy best. Down it goes then to the underground levels to feed the summer's wells. It'll be August before the springs feel the benefit, but that's just when one wants it. That it is so seems part of the natural providence in things. That job done and the winds of March have their proper place. The last of the winter's rains before the spring-

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time plough and the cultivator, and not after them, is the better rotation. The winds can then get ready the tilths for the seeding, with April showers just warm and wet enough to keep things growing afterwards. But we don't get all we should like in this world, and nobody has learnt better how to get round his difficulties than the countryman. He knows that the man who gets behind seldom catches up if it's the season he's running after. There are men who keep a tractor on their place for just such a month as we are now dealing with. There may be just an hour or two in a day, or a day in the week of broken weather, when the land can be "touched."

A few still hours and the manure distributor can whip over the acres with an even spread and little discomfort to anyone. Quick-acting fertilisers are put on about now. A phosphatic stimulant applied to the fescues' hesitating shoots may mean that the grass is cut and carted well before St. Swithin's Day. Ten days of June are worth more than the whole month of July to the haymaker. But let the industriously provident farmer take that task on in a high wind or half a one, and it's done neither well nor comfortably.

A tractor may stand idle half the year; the horses may do better work on ninety days out of a hundred, but on the farm at any rate the tool pays best which can crowd a week's work into the only day suited for it, or can snatch a crop from under the very nose of a thunderstorm when it gets to harvesting. Men make all sorts of hay on the same farm for no other reason than the obvious one that we poor mortals cannot yet be in more than one field at a time. Men stage controversies about horses and tractors in the market-place or over the pint-

pot, partly because no class of folk like an argument better on such lines, and partly because it's a proper issue far from settled yet.

They mostly argue, naturally enough, on the lines of their upbringing, and the men used to horseflesh still outnumber the mechanically experienced. But the man who ever lost part of his crop because the weather beat him, the man who "muddled" his wheat in, or couldn't move his couchy fallows about when the one chance came to him is the man in farming who might have made a tractor pay. It's a dozen such moments in a year's operations, lost or saved, that settle the fate of most men who get a livelihood from land.

The right tool applied at the right time is a main clue to the farming mystery about profits. That some farms are shaped and sized all wrong, and that others are run without adequate resources are sidelights on the same mystery. There are men who can keep their dung-carts going in the fields whilst neighbours give the job up on the same class of land and the same day. And good reason, for they're getting stuck in their gateways (for the first time this winter let me say).

Rubber pneumatic tyres on a farm-cart are strange enough sight yet for the critic to scoff at. First costs may be high, but that's the finish of them, and if a couple of horses and a pair of carts, fitted with rubbered wheels, can get over the same ground, wet or fine, with the same weight behind them, as three teams without them, then the last year or two dates a minor revolution in farm transport. And there's no arguing about this. One can fit a wheelbarrow, cart, wagon and now, at last, the tractor with rubber tyres and register the most honest

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advance made in a generation against agricultural drudgery.

A walk round a farm and there are plenty of implements knocking about. Some men's plaint is that, done with, they've nowhere to house them. Buildings with roofs off are no sanctuary for wagons; a common enough sight though. Farm structures were put up when farming was a more manual affair and few landlords to-day care to do more than take the rent. As for the tenant who bought, well—he just wishes he hadn't in nine cases out of ten. Those who favour "owner-occupiership" for farming need to remember that there are very few farms in the country with a complete range of buildings fit to house either the modern "milker" or motor.

Springing up in this English county and that, Kent, Hereford, Norfolk and Hertford, are museums for the remembrance of the farming ways of yesterday. Ox and horse shoes hang over the rows of ox yokes and wagon poles. Men dragged at the plough even before oxen, as men drag at hoes even in to-day's orchards and market gardens. Sheep-dipping cradles and old-fashioned corn drills are seen on those floors of ancient barns as reminders, if nothing else, that even in farming ways change with the times.

There they are, for anyone who doubts the fact, to see. Tools that are done, tools that have been improved upon, even in farming.



SCARCELY a month ago a young fellow descended upon a small country town to open up a new business. Last Friday I came across him sitting in front of

the "Temperance Hotel" fire, which was made up of small coke and cinders. He nibbled the ends of his fingers in a mood of despair. To use his own words, he was "up against it." Up against what? That was what was beating him. He hardly knew himself.

Freshly promoted by a multiple concern, he had left behind him somewhere in London's growing neighbourhood, a much-soiled set of assistant's overalls, to don a managerial immaculacy. For a few weeks he had headed his little army of assistants round and round those heathen walls. Fanfare after fanfare had been trumpeted into the ears of its citizens. Proclamations, whose signatories were lords of life and death to him, had been handed in at every door, half-opened in most cases.

From the dower-house on the outskirts to the slum-dwelling at the centre, his heralds missed no one. They even had a few copies left over for the children released from a coop of a school "to give to mother." But for one thing, the young manager wore his bowler hat at a tilt that pronounced him "a reg'lar Cockney sort of a feller." And for another, if you shopped at his place "the money went out of the town altogether, especially when you recollect that most of the meat 'e sells be foreign meat." A lot in that, some said.

The shop was the most up-to-date in the town. That wouldn't be much help to start with, anyhow. At night a thousand candle-power of electric lighting threw an adjoining pub into the shade and collected the ne'er-dowells about the shop's windows like moths and flies. The truth was, in such a town the glare of publicity and an unwelcome bodyguard fluttering idly about

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the entrance made things difficult for the thrifty housewife.

Across the road, fifty yards up and fifty yards down, two well-established rivals had sentries posted night and day now. Judd had been there since 1757. Flesher had come a century later, a farmer's son setting up for himself. His ambitious venture was to be later crowned with every civic dignity within reach of a town not exceeding two thousand five hundred inhabitants. Flesher had established himself on the same side of the street as Judd. It was symbolic of their mutualities, not their rivalries. Once a daughter of Flesher's had married a cousin of Judd's. They never "called" on each other's customers. They warned each other of "bad" debts and never "undercut."

The one would even buy a beast for the other at market and drive it home alongside his own purchase for the week's trade. They were the only butchers in the place. Their prices maintained a singular uniformity. You could always get a bit of good meat at either shop, but you had to pay for it.

Then along comes "Universal Supplies, Ltd." A local bank manager gave Judd the tip as to who had bought up "Ye Olde China Shoppe." Groucher, the tailor, heaved a sigh of relief when he heard "definitely," as the rumour had persisted for a while, that "Styles Ltd.," the one-suit-a-year-for-a-shilling-a-week firm, were not opening out. Judd and Flesher had lived long enough in the place to know the purchasing power of every neighbour to the last penny. Credits were long and methods easy. Farmers settled big bills with a couple of sheep. The farm worker would settle when

“the time comes for I to draw m’ bit o’ harvest money.” Or lambing-money if it was the shepherd.

Before the tradesman’s motor-van took to scouring the country lanes for business, the rumble of the farm-wagon setting out for High Appleden “wi’ a load” would bring the women-folk out to their gates for Jerry the carter to “call in” at Judd’s or Pickering’s for this or that. There’s much less of it done nowadays. The women go further afield for their groceries. But the country butcher still holds his clientele by niceties in business not easy for a young branch manager from “Lunnon way” to get to grips with

Butcher’s bills soon become big bills. Housewives in a small town of only two thousand five hundred inhabitants may be tempted to go just a little bit out of their way to either Judd or Flesher’s shop, but, with sentries looking on from across the road, it will be some time before they will have courage enough to go into the new shop. They stare long enough to be able to compare prices; that is all, but it’s sufficient.

Judd and Flesher, ever since the workmen began pulling down the old china-shop, have lowered their prices “considerable.” The young man may not be doing as much business as he’d hoped to by this time. But then, a month ago he’d never met such places as High Appleden before. And yet I think even High Appleden will change, if he can keep the women’s interest going in his windows. At least, that’s what I told him.



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EASTER—what a people's holiday! The first of them for the year, and the healthiest. A million feet are already itching to run away from office stools and workshop benches. Young feet that will respond more involuntarily to the trill of the lark's note in March than the drawl of the saxophones. The one is a makeshift, and most of us know in our hearts well enough that it is so. And if we had forgotten, the first spring morning we waken up roused by the riot of song outside the window leads our hearts' certainties back to the beginning of things.

We know where we are the moment the blackbird sings, and we set out on a road and a day that belongs as much to us as to any other whom we may chance to meet. Evening, and we turn home again with our hands filled with primroses or wild daffodils. And what have we done with the hours in between? Goodness knows, and who cares? Sufficient that we had the chance to lie on our backs in the grass and just talk out the muddle of things with a friend! Or we scrambled up the broken sides of a green hill and looked over a new country that stretched as far away as the sundown, leaving us with a longing never to return to the old confusions.

Easter is a delicious interlude, responsible for more resolutions likely to be kept than a New Year handi-capped by a shivering start in the dark depths of winter. New life and new hopes are astir. The countryman takes little note of the holidays. It might be better if he would, though he stands in less need of them than the folk of the towns, if it is the strain of things that we take mostly into account. But sameness can prove as deadly as strain, though it is more easily dealt with.

In such cases it is usually ourselves that want shaking up a bit, and not our circumstances.

It is enterprise we need more of in the countryside. Communal enterprise bent upon a combination of social amenities with the individual's initiative about his own affairs. We leave local government to well-meaning but retired gentry, or sulky farmers thinking only of the rates. Their isolated farms cannot be brought into the scheme of things, for a while, at any rate, and so the rest of us must be made to go without a proper water supply, for instance, even though the source of it may be running to waste by the side of the very road along which the thirsty cottages stand. Or the gentry have put in (some years before) an electric plant for their own establishment. So why bother unduly to press for the earlier coming of a common supply from the national "grids" now within sight of a not even lamp-lighted village?

If the public initiative of many a progressive town could be exercised over a wide enough area of several parts of rural England, there could arise such a stimulus to general development that this country could lead the way to a more sanely balanced civilisation.

More deftly woven, the natural qualities of rusticity and the sophisticated culture of the towns could minister to the human system admirably. But at the moment, small as the country is, we swing from one extreme to the other, and both town and country are antagonised by the other. The town wants its food too cheap to make up for the cost of its amusements. That's what the country thinks. And the townsfolk have an idea that country folk are inclined to be stupid and certainly "behind the times" in most things.

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If ever a nation was equipped suitably for the mutual advancement of both life and work in town and country alike, it is Britain. The present dullness of the one balances the jangle of the other, and to deal satisfactorily with the one might well lead to a correction of the other. A City man took a stroll round these fields last week, convinced beyond a doubt that "things can't go on much longer without a break" in the world of finance, which he knows better than most. Money was completely out of touch with realities. "We might have to begin all over again." Those were his words. The countryside may yet prove to be a safety-valve of civilisation.



WHEN the wind backs round to face the sun one can expect fine days. With her royal highness well over the line, the sky became full of her fleecy escorts, gossamer outposts of retreating storms. Winds, never to be taken captive in defeat, changed sides, bowing her a chilly welcome from those Northern fastnesses that lie beyond the witchery of such beaming eyes. Her train is now caught up by a gathering host of little wings, migrants returning as the news spreads of her journeying. The chiff-chaff is the earliest of these, full of excitement to be at home again. Up on the Downs the flitting white of the wheatears, back to a favourite haunt once more, will glint intimations of more of these homecomings well in time for the Easter jaunt.

But the thrush is already sitting on her eggs, and away at the back of the woods a swelling chorus get them-

selves ready for the harmonic festivals next month and in May. Blackbirds who stayed with us, preen on a post, with much grub to choose from at last, now that the worms are moving in a softer earth and the fruit-buds show upon the bushes. Brimstone butterflies flutter prematurely at noon. Yet they would be safer tucked up for a while longer in the gnarled crevice of some old oak's bark or a dingy crack in a barn-rafter. Sap is late rising in the trees, though. Rainfall sets the pace there, and that's been scarce until the last week or two. It never came better for grass, however, and April should yield the cows more than the usual bite; a "proper bellyful," in fact. You'll know when you see them flop down with a creaking grunt of content, their ears forward and their black muzzles wet.

My word! Not many farms could have held out for much longer. Dry provender like hay had reached a premium price for these times. Six pounds a ton for a bit of good, with the seller indifferent. It's fortunate that Easter is as early as it is, or the roaming visitors might otherwise have found many a field-gate shut in their faces, the meadow already closed to make sure of as big a cut of fodder as June can give.

And I passed two men strolling villagewards in the evening dusk at seven this week, a spade apiece set across a wide shoulder, looking more like gamekeepers than gardeners in that light. The digging is mostly done, so whatever you and I may do with our few days of spring-time holiday, the two that I passed on the road, at any rate, will be getting a few rows of peas in and taking a chance with some "early" potatoes.

No holiday-maker will get more out of a day than

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will the folk who are looking forward to Friday, when they can roll up their sleeves and "have a go at the garden." And the chance for a good start at it is better even than last year. Rains that have "gone in"; wind and sun competing so for the upturned lips of the furrows that the soil crumbles down into a gentle covering over of the tiny seed. The earth's humblest offices are a rite as deeply felt in our hearts as the pull of the tides and the everlasting stars, if we are its proper users.

Few things we do bring as rich a peace when the task is our choosing. And even men who are the hardest pressed for a living out of land know usually they've no quarrel with its responsiveness, nine times out of "bad luck's" ten. If we're to believe our ears, it's all the other way. Eggs are too cheap, they say, mainly because there are so many of 'em about. As for milk—well, it's a most wonderful story.

What we can't seem to get into most of our heads is that when you get down to mother Earth, the ordinary laws of political economy don't apply, though, I suppose, looking at things in a more ordinary way, it might be very much better for farming in this country if there weren't so many of us in it "just for the fun of the thing."

I know it isn't sensible or sound to discuss country living sentimentally. Unfortunately, most of us do; some, because we had to leave it long ago for something that has turned out worse. Others, because we haven't a living to get out of farming, or we take our walks abroad as it suits us. We see the best of the picture.

All the same, the sort of life that brings you face to face with a growing lamb that hops and skips about a

fallen tree trunk because it counts on you to join in the game has a quality hard to define in pounds, shillings and pence. There are moments which come to even the rudest of us when it would be difficult to name a price for a mare nibbling sugar out of your hand over a gate on a summer evening.

One doesn't always grow daffodils, even in the country, to pluck and sell at 2*d.* a bunch. In fact, there are days, and we've had one or two of them this past week, when it's hard to go about farming in what might be called a businesslike way. But that isn't to say that more hard-headed folk, with sensibilities a shade less refined maybe, should reckon to be able to buy our butter and cheese for anything less than it's properly worth.

Oh no! But they try it on nevertheless—especially when they happen to see the primroses coming on and the time comes for people to stroll about the fields, filling the arms full of cowslip and buttercup. And as for the farm worker, here there is every sign of a real awakening. No longer will it be enough to talk picturesquely about his qualities, only to reward him miserably in hard cash. He will not stand for it in this generation. Sentiments are not enough.

The growing of food has a cost to it, much the same as to that of any other commodities that we buy and sell.



“**M**ARK my words, John, lad, such a time will come. It may not be in my day, but these things 'll be, sure as fate!” And Old Logie, the cobbler, has made me feel sure enough ever since, though at the time I listened to him in a young, fascinated sort of way.

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He was an alien to the place, and reputed to be an anarchist. His Irish brogue accounted for some of the prejudice.

No one knew quite how, but he managed to get hold of the only bit of freehold in the village for a workshop. 'Twas nearly thirty years ago, and the folk then hardly knew what he meant by the words. But along the wall that faced the road he painted up, in wide, deep letters, "Socialism, the Hope of the World."

Old Logie has been dead some years. Rain and wind have blurred the letters faint, but they will stand—one of the curiosities of a village set high upon the Sussex Weald. Few went near him at the start, but he was the only cobbler round for miles, and there were no buses to the towns in those days. He would talk on and on, usually with his mouth full of tacks, without lifting his eyes from his work except for an occasional pause. Then he would hear the click of the shop-door latch, and would, perhaps, wait to see who the new-comer would turn out to be.

The village got used to him. He was seldom off his stool in waking hours, and never tried to interfere with the ways of the place. And children loved him. They would warm themselves at his little stove as he mended their shoes—the same shoes time and again. As soon as the job was done he would look up, slip down a metal-rimmed bent pair of spectacles from where they lodged on his puckered forehead top, with a "There y'are, m'dear, and tell mother that'll be a shillun." A most respectful "All right, Mr. Logie," and how often did that prove to be the end of the transaction! Often enough.

Old Logie died. He seemed to disappear rather than

die. At least three other cobblers sprang up to get his trade. Whether it is leather is poorer or the work isn't as good, it's a common complaint that the children's shoes don't last so long nowadays, and it costs a lot more to get them repaired than it used to.

After the War "High Cleeves" was taken by a City gentleman. He bought the whole estate, though it was some time before he could get hold of Logie's old shop. In the end he did. Knowing little or nothing about farming, he kept the farms on himself, putting a bailiff in charge. We only saw him at week-ends, riding round on a good sort of horse. We understood that most of his money had been made during the War and that he was very rich.

Anyhow, he spent a heap of money on the farms and took to farming seriously. But one cannot farm by telegram, as he tried to do. So once again "High Cleeves" is up for sale, with local would-be bidders shy of what seem to them such extravagant ranges of new buildings to be kept going.

Many of the farms about here have passed of late years into the possession of successful City men. Here and there they are making a go of the places they own, but on the whole the undertaking baffles them. It's not as easy as it might seem to capture the spirit of the working countryside. Neither the man with his message of Socialism nor the man with his money and his business ways has quite caught its imagination yet. But the countryside is taking notice all the same, and wondering what it ought to do about them both.



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EVERY raspberry cane has a dozen or more young green leaves sprouting from its stem. The pear trees are just pimpled with blossom buds waiting to burst out. Here and there an apple shows a pinkening tip. And I know a chestnut, "the finest tree you ever did see," trimming up its candelabra ready for the next full moon. Buds are imperceptibly filling out under the swelling impulses of puberty, unable to resist the lure of the sun's handsome ways.

Night frosts, with a touch of the old hag about them, hold up lean fingers of warning. But who blames the daffodil when she leans back her golden head at high noon, knowing full well that young Spring is bending over her? Not I.

About his shoulders he wears a cloak of blue sky. His shoe-buckles are already dusty with the pollen of primroses. The children have slipped a bunch of white violets into his hand. A little bird pipes a new tune from under the lilac bough arched over his head. Soft airs, deliriously charged with caresses, have brought to her messages more subtly set to music than we more unfortunate humans can ever hope to strike from keyboard or string.

Bees on the wing add a bar to the symphonic medley of sounds heard only by petalled ears. What a morning it is when the daffodil holds up her first blushes as an acknowledgment of defeat! Ah, but young Spring is such a philanderer! Conquered, the daffodil lets down her tresses. Leaves, graceful fingers from behind which shy loveliness peeps, until no doubt is left in a flower's heart, are folded to her side.

Young Spring may take the daffodils' first kiss. He

has no time to stay for another. The rest of her smiling kisses are for us, or the dull corner. He's already away in the woods making love to the bluebells and celandines. The vulgar may stare at, the greedy may snatch at, the thoughtless may even trample upon, the loveliness which is the golden daffodil, what matters it now?

The moment for which the young daffodil budded and blossomed was the one when she opened her eyes to find young Spring bending over her in his cloak of blue sky. And neither you nor I saw just when that happened. I suspect the, brimstone butterfly could tell us, though it isn't usual for him to be pottering around as early as March. But he was there all the same. A sort of business understanding between him and young Spring. And a couple of queen wasps as well. They could stay no longer in their stuffy holes in the old brick wall. They must have developed the uneasy feeling which finds its way into the bones of even the most inveterate of "lie-abeds" when the sun streams down out of a clear sky.

I came across them trying out wings stiff with cramp, and bumping into friend and foe like a pair of prisoners bundled out of a dark dungeon into the glare of a Saharen daylight. The world was much farther on with its business than they expected. They looked a bit ruffled, as if they wanted to row somebody for not having called them up sooner. For the moment I had the feeling that I knew more about what was going on in their range of interests than they did. But I wasn't disposed to be very helpful about the matter. I even thought of drawing Peter's attention to their presence, thinking of the few damsons we should be watching so hopefully a little later on.

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Still, I didn't. It was such a delightful day. One felt genial, tolerant. I'm wondering now if I made a mistake, and whether I haven't let myself in for a ticklish job, say in July, tackling "wapsies' nests" somewhere or other down the garden path.

For one thing, I didn't want to bother Peter. Eight hours a day and a cow to milk, thirty pigs to feed and clean out—"they be making some muck now they be gotten bigger"—potatoes to plant, seeds to sow, hens to feed, water to pump up, and "well-nigh half the garden could do wi' a forkin' over." Peter begins to move his cap up and down a little ruefully when he "comes to think about it."

Aye, but he's got a better job than a good many. A job of the right kind, I mean. He loves every minute of it. Every now and then we both take a turn together, looking for "a bit of wood to cut up," or stopping a gap up in a hedge.

Simple jobs in their way and yet with a touch of adventure about them. A partridge flies up at your feet. You mark the spot and find a clutch of eggs still warm with her "sitting." You toss the mother bird a wish of "good luck" and pass on, half wondering what'll be the next thing to come out from under your feet.

Genial days are they when young Spring stands over the daffodils in his cloak of blue sky.



I HAVE been driven to the desperate conclusion that the busiest creatures at the moment in either earth, sea or air must be the moles. Their whole kingdom

must be either celebrating some sort of centenary festival, in an utter, perhaps intoxicated, state of high jinks, or else they've declared war on somebody or other, and are feverishly constructing a most elaborate system of trenches based upon the most complicated set of plans obtainable from Christendom.

Unfortunately the dry spell favours their festivities or their fighting, whichever it is. And such unkind winds as have prevailed on and off for some time now do nothing to discourage their subterranean activities. Based upon information supplied by the children, who are most active members of a semi-secret society for the promotion of cultural relations with the underworld, especially with moles, I'm inclined to their theory that some sort of war is on.

A certain cherished seed-bed has now become so completely hummocked with earthworks and ramparts that I, at any rate, am convinced it has been chosen as a "General Headquarters." If so, then it certainly looks as though Marshal Moley's forces have decided to ravage a most highly cultivated piece of territory. The prospect rather appals me, especially as a look over the fence, stout enough to keep rabbits and foxes at bay, shows me an eerie waste of what might well be a devastated area of extinct volcanoes on a miniature scale. So I know what I am in for if they get the upper hand. It becomes a most regrettable business, but the point has been reached where sentiment breaks down. Stern measures to resist the invaders have had to be decided upon.

Other men have other foes. Many a small farmer spent his Easter holiday rolling autumn-sown wheat or oats to check "wireworm," the larvæ from a beetle's

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eggs laid in the warm ground the summer before. One man I know has had to resow a fair number of acres with spring oats because the wheat first put in got lifted from a dry soil by a series of frosts, and then had its fibrous rootlets withered by keen winds. He must have been latish with his wheat-sowing, as in the ordinary way wheat sown up to November has come through looking well. Once established, dry weather will only suit wheat which sends its moisture-seeking roots as far down as an oak's, if necessity requires. On the whole, growth is at a standstill. The wind has a keen edge to it from whatever quarter it comes. But tucked behind a bramble thicket we had our first picnic of the year. The sun had the sky to itself and made our corner as cosy as if it were June. There was no trouble to get a fire going. Dried grass and a few hedge trimmings, and a kettle was boiling before we were ready for it.

I made a discovery this Eastertide. I tracked a friend to a lair set in the side of a wooded hill that had more beauty spread out in front of it and around it than any spot I have yet visited. And I've done my share of travelling. How he's managed to keep the place to himself puzzles me. I've known him for years, but except that he "had a bit of a cottage in the country," he's said nothing alluring enough to betray his hillside secrets.

A cottage built of the hill's own rock and raftered with its trees. A view that finished to the north in a haze that was London and to the south in a glint that was the sea. Wild daffodils for posies and spring-fed pools terraced in and about a forest-garden. This man has a job in London that keeps him busy. But when I am told again that he is out-of-town, it will be an easy guess where to

find him. Not so far from his place was a stile that was as true a lovers' squeeze as can be imagined. Even folk on more ordinary quests stayed awhile and checked their tittle-tattle to drink in the view seen from it. But that old evergreen oak set in the hollow below took little notice of who came and went, though the track under its limbs was worn bare by just the width that two of us walking with an arm in another's would take.



OLD-fashioned barns, where once the flail threshed out the corn, sell these days at a premium as country tea-rooms. The gaitered, whiskered labourer, with his shrewd toss of a barley sample hand to hand, standing up to the light across those double doorways, is missing. He's no more; a dainty granddaughter, aproned and ribboned, flits to and fro over the selfsame stone flags that nursed many a pair of sore, bended knees formerly. Only the ghosts are there. One can't pass a converted barn without seeing them.

Easter brings these tea-room shutters down. The week-end holiday-makers made them all hustle again. The spinsters who run them get more than a mere livelihood out of them. Home-made scones and the knick-knacks of cottage furnishings—pewter and pottery, warming-pans, and whatnots—combine a hobby with an income for folk who are hibernating during the bleak months of the year.

Cobbled courtyards, not so long since the scene of fattening bullocks against a background of straw and dung, crowd up nowadays with motoring, cycling, hik-

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ing visitors from here, there and everywhere. The more hole-in-the-corner the affair, the more rustic; the more out-of-the-way, the heartier is the jaded appetite of office-worker and shop-walker when let loose about the simple meal. What with garages, flower-bordered and posied, and barns turned tea-rooms, country lanes have become more like race-meetings at times, for fashion and chatter.

A new source of wealth fructifies in fresh fields of rural enterprise. Farming is no longer the mainspring of parish income; so thin a stream of spending as it has afforded spills meanness over every sort of activity, from shop-counter to collection-plate. But the cottage gains. The women earn a few shillings washing-up; the bonnier daughters flash their bright eyes across the tea-trays at customers who wouldn't have crossed their plain path any other way. Smart frocks, smart manicure with lips to match and the farm-boys' chances of wedding a schoolmate grow less and less. His money won't run to it, so he changes his job. The farmers know as much. One bunch that I know held a meeting not so long since to discuss such a phenomenon. Who is to work on the farms in the future if the lads don't take to it? "Let's teach 'em farming at school. Begin with 'em at twelve and then get the authorities to apprentice 'em to it afterwards. Too few men coming along for the land, where before there were too many." No wonder the wages begin to rise. There'll be no more carters and cowmen, thatchers and ditchers to step into the old men's shoes when they are dead and gone.

The sluggish flow of the ploughman's earnings doesn't concern the village shopkeeper like it did, either. He

fits out his window and shelves to catch the eye of folk with fatter purses than cottagers carry about with them. Motorists do at any rate bring money with their noise. And there's this to be said, the bar parlour hardly suits the taste of his lady companion. "So-and-so's Ales," however well-brewed their claims, are hardly the attraction they set out to be. "Dainty Teas," a few short yards farther along the same lane, get the newer business nearly every time. "Pull in here" is too peremptory an invitation. It was put there for mill-going carters with a touch of morning frost still on their beards or a dry throat from a dusty road later.

Easter behind us and a growing stream of callers now sets flowing a widening rivulet of revenue—a most useful supplementary indeed. Cowkeepers with too small a herd to qualify as members of a Milk Board bring out their little, untidy painted boards with "Cream for Sale" sprawled out in poor paint. Poultry-keepers invite the passers-by to collect eggs laid that very day, "straight from the nest." More than one man I know has a lengthening list of customers only too glad to call perhaps once or even twice a day for a new consignment. Petrol alone must have added another shilling to the dozen's price, for the privilege. To the one it is an outing; to the other, just all the difference between a good price and a rotten one, especially as now and then a spring chicken swells out the total on the bill.

Soon it will be flowers and fruit; a bundle or two of rhubarb for a shilling; a pint or two of gooseberries, rising to the zenith of this ever-increasing contact of grower and customer in June's strawberries.

Easter passed sets this flourishing traffic on the

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move. As for the school-boy, it ushers in another season for the pranks and adventures that only village life can provide an arena for. Hunting for nests begins; the climbing of trees. Last summer's haunts must be visited again, and fresh ones found. Once the fields are clean, the paths more or less dry, village boys find compensations in a variety of circumstances that no street corner can offer. What have the towns to offer these lads that they cannot find for themselves once the dull home nights of the winter are done? To start up this creature and that, merely poking round somebody else's hedges, what bigger thrill can a half-holiday bring, what huntsman meet better sport?

Farmers have their evil reputations to be challenged, and it may end in a chase that can rival the films. It's too full a life, too rich a round of days for any to forget, and we never do. So the countryside opens up. The ploughings are about finished and the seedings begun. Adventurers and holiday-makers, farmers and the rest of us, with Easter behind us, the summer begins.



APRIL has set about matters in a most promising way. She had no sooner turned the corner than the leaf-buds in the hedges as good as "told you so." To stroll round the hedgerows now is a joy. Every few yards one exchanges greetings with old friends, with faces young and beaming, every bit as if it were really once again Creation's first morning.

The children run into the house with rapturous announcements about their discoveries in the wood. A

new carpet has been laid overnight, patterned with wind-flowers, or, as they are more properly called, anemones. Recent rains have set the grass growing. The cows begin to turn their noses up at the winter's hay in the stalls. Their neck-chains rattle with a restless eagerness to be turned out after the morning's milking. Long before noon they are "down," chewing a succulent cud with an air of summer contentment, too lazy to move as one passes. Some, the more timid perhaps, make a feint of doing so, only to sink back on their haunches with a bovine suggestion of relief, thankful that the passer-by was intent on business that didn't concern them.

As for the birds, most of them are at the honeymoon stage of their conjugal arrangements. But the season's matches are made. For such substantial establishments as the rooks construct, an earlier start was essential. They go about their affairs with what seems to me a rather sombre disdain of the flightier, more ecstatic overtures of the smaller birds. But within their own four walls they keep up a racket long after the rest of the feathered world have turned in for the night. Some find their way home very late and are hardly discernible from the ground in the evening light. The rook is a dark fellow in more senses than one. That's how I feel about him.

I have a notion that there are good and bad amongst them, as amongst us. I suspect night clubs with proprietors who strut about with heavy gold chains across their chests and fat cigars between their beaks. As I look out towards the tops of those tall trees, when all the rest of a rustic world is settling for sleep, and pick out the accents of the hubbub up there amongst the rooks, I

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hear repeated the street cries of an urban civilisation. Perhaps the rook family started the racket which has become Piccadilly and Broadway once it is time to light up. Anyhow, their noises usually die down in a very dissatisfied sort of way, just as though they'd like to go on with things if only they dare defy somebody or other communally appointed to close them down for the night.

Owl alone knows what they get up to. There is something policeman-like about what he must know goes on after dark. There are other signs of spring we keep a look out for. We're expecting the coming of the swallows again any time now, and we listen intently for the repetition of a sound we thought only a moment ago was the cuckoo's call. It should come any time now, and take us right on into June, and the summer well on its way.

Potato planting, a more prosaic occupation than prying into birds' nests, is in full swing. The ground works well, and if only a drier summer comes along than the last, there will be some big crops about before October, for a good many farmers meant to "go in for a few taters this year."

On the lighter lands, a pair of horses and a lad take charge of a ton roller that has performed similar services many a time. The lad sits on, holding the rein tight enough to keep the edge of the roll lapping the last bout so that no part of the land be missed. But it's a dull job, and by no means enough in itself to keep the mind as taut as the rein in his hand. What does he think about as the acres crunch and squelch—oh, so slowly—under him? As he comes up again and again to the sky-

line and has a chance to take a long look at the country stretching away to the distance, does a faint ambitious stir move within him to do something bigger than this with his life? Many's the time I've done the same sort of job and dreamed dreams, having only a bit of my mind on my task. A surprising number have come true, and for some of the rest, well—there's still plenty of time. At least, I hope so.



NOTHING can look so desolate as a forsaken farm. A walk over it, and every battered field-gate clicks behind one much like a page of melancholy history turned over. Someone or other started out so bravely to tackle the wet, heavy acres. A few land-drains, piled in an untidy heap on the lower headland of a three-cornered bit, dank with neglect, provides witness enough of an heroic intent. The last furrows struck by the broken plough cast under the hedge can still be seen. Time has rounded their ridges into funeral moulds; the hollows between are carpeted with a green fungus thriving on damp, itself the forerunner of decay.

Striking across country the other day, I came upon a spot as derelict as this. Wooded slopes ran down to the crumbling edges of a stream. Gaudy jays simulated terror as the crackling of dead twigs gave warning of the stranger's approach. They crashed their way through the top branches, making hysterical shrieks so typical of the scatter-brained element in any community caught napping by accident or emergency. One could hear the excited flip-flap of wood-pigeons making off and away

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in the distance, cock-pheasants warning their less distinguishable mates nesting in the undergrowth to "sit" closer while the danger passed.

Cock-pheasants make a row when they're alarmed not unlike the rattle that boy bird-scarers use to keep the rooks from peas, or starlings from the cherry trees. If three or four of them take up the chorus, then it's not only the hen birds who prick up their ears, but the game-keepers also. I knew full well if there were a keeper about, the cock-pheasants' alarms would soon bring him on to my track. So they did, and that's how I learned the story of the farm's decline.

A heap of bricks, a few of the real old-fashioned tiles (a dozen or two that were whole had been put aside by a connoisseur) and some odd rafters marked the site of an abandoned barn. Overhanging the debris, from a nail struck into a tree, a notice intimated proceedings against trespassers; so the well-worn track turned away disgusted—it had so obviously turned its back on the notice!—over the stream by a rickety plank, and up the hill. Rabbits nibbled at young dandelion leaves. They love 'em at that stage and hopped away reluctantly.

I haven't met a real gamekeeper for years. In fact, so long ago is it that I had quite forgotten for the moment that it's not for the trespassing party to set the ball rolling with so nonchalant a "good-day" as mine was. I ought to have remembered that proceedings open up more brusquely as a rule. He made the conventional moves. My initial gesture of good-will was brushed aside in an harangue about how I came to be where I was and hadn't I seen this notice and that. I, on my part, set out to prove that the said notice was too high up to

be read, but that having read it, took it to mean that it referred to another path altogether. As I say, I haven't done that sort of thing for a long time. It took quite twenty years off my shoulders, except that I was able to make it perfectly plain that, having lived on the countryside most of my life now, there was no turning me back.

He carried a trug-full of "feed" upon his arm, a well-assorted mash of corn and meal for the pheasant family. This was a "game preserve" in the full sense of the word. I know what it is to scatter a few handfuls of barley about to encourage pheasants to prefer your woods to a less thoughtful neighbour's. But this was a fattening mixture and he knew where a hundred nests were. In the season they usually "bagged" anything up to fifteen hundred birds. I ventured that there seemed to be a lot of rabbits about. Not enough to satisfy him though. The farmer in me and the gamekeeper in him were soon at loggerheads, though we tried hard not to show it. How did he account for the neglected air of the place? Why had somebody or other started to plough and then left the furrows to grow green with moss? He put it down to "bad farming," and said that the tenant had had to leave soon after Sir Anthony Muzzell "took the place over." Over his shoulder I could see a magnificent specimen of a cock-pheasant strutting up and down at a discreet distance. And I'll swear this dandy winked at me as the keeper tendered such an explanation.

"You can take it from me that this place is run for our benefit," was written all over that sophisticated strut. "And if you don't believe me, take a careful look over that basket." With the gamekeeper, as with most

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of us, "times were not as good as they had been." *Then*, one day's shoot would have brought down a thousand birds. *Then*, you'd have killed more rabbits in a month than you would meet in a twelvemonth nowadays. I let him talk, with an increasing pity for the man who'd left that broken plough behind. My mind's eye could picture his fields of growing corn in the spring-time, with the rabbits hopping in and out of the woodsides to nibble at the refreshing succulence of its young green. Or, later in the year, with the grain at the milky stage or hardening to ripeness, the tall stalks beaten to earth by the tread of those thousand pheasants, corn-fed out of that trug-basket, and brought up to the idea, bred to make a rich man's half-holiday.

It might be that his rent came next to nothing, but low rents seldom make a good farmer of anybody. The land's either too poor in that case or he has had to put up with this kind of thing; so good men go elsewhere. Before we parted, the gamekeeper and myself came to the conclusion that "times were not as they were" for him, because rich folk prefer to race about in cars to tramping about fields with a gun over their shoulders. I left him with the distinct impression that so far as the wealthy classes are concerned, "the rot had set in."



AN incessant wind with a keen edge to it has been no friend to us this week. By day it has beaten down many a brave daffodil. And at night, taking the last look round at the cows in the stall or the chicks clustering close to the foster-mother's lamp, it would

set about us like some ill-tempered phantom, held on leash only by hands as invisible as its own lean shape.

To me there is something fiendish about a raw wind on a dark night in a month that should be all spring. It turns even a gentle rain into something merely spiteful, and whistles mocking tunes down the chimney-tops of an old house just as if to jeer at the folk sitting closer about the hearth below, folks who had hoped they had done with the winter.

Saturday was the season's last day for hunting. It is usually the biggest meet of the year. But the crowd we passed, straggling for a mile or more along the country lane, were already wet through to the skin without a sight of the fox. They looked disconsolate. One felt like offering prayers to April to be kinder, not so much to these as to the rest of the folk to whom Saturday brings a brief break with work, so eagerly anticipated.

There's an old man about here who takes every opportunity the weather's caprice affords to voice a weighty opinion that the "seasons 'm not what they were. They be changin'!" I can't pretend to know. But my last ten years' experience of the ways of March and April is certainly not in line with that of even Victorian poets, if their words really have history in them as well as rhythm. Unfortunately, dull weather plays havoc with our moods. And if it combines with ill-luck it can play no small part in tragedies which break over the heads of a hamlet like a thunderclap out of a blue sky.

A conspicuous landmark dominates our parish, a clump of spruce shaped like an enormous V. They were planted on the bare side of a down to commemorate a royal event, and have grown into fine trees. Trees

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with trunks as straight and with tops which shape and meet as if they were as architecturally constructed as the pillars and arches in a church's nave. And the sough of the wind in their branches makes music as ethereal as any that comes from the hidden pipes of a cathedral organ. Last week a man, not as old as he looked, one who had worked for pay all his life about farmyards, was found hanging from a limb of one of the trees that make up the V standing over our parish.

The news muttered its way amongst us. We repeated it to our neighbours almost under our breath. But the talk about it may soon die down. He was a farm-labourer, tired, for some reason or other, of life, and so he threw it away with his own hand. But every time I look at that V after this, it will not be to think of "Victoria" but of him. He had worked for most of us in our turn. What was it that few, if any, of us ever saw in him which made him choose such a place, high up there on the side of the hill, looking out over the fields and farms on which he had worked most of his days? I shall go on asking myself that for a very long time to come.

A mile or two along the road I passed the time of day with another old man repairing, or "pointing" I think they call it, a wall. The lichen had spread a foothold into every possible crevice. More than a generation's rain had been at its disintegrating work since the job was last done. "It wanted doin'," so this old man said. "Time 'twas done," he repeated. It was a churchyard wall, and what with the weight of the soil behind it and the roots of a yew in the corner sapping under it, he was right enough. But there was no air of

tragedy about him. He had a pipe in his mouth, and a wit about his speech which ministered to a philosophy about life that will take him safely enough to the natural end of his days. For a moment he paused to hold the pipe in the same hand as the trowel and to sum it all up. "We'm all made different, and a right good thing it were'n all. Temp'rament 'as a lot to do wi' it."



"GOOD morning, George, and what d'you think of summer time again?" Old "Jarge," as he is to all of us, was coming out of the stable door last Sunday morning, having "baited the hosses" for the day, their day of rest after a dull but heavy week's work rolling and harrowing both corn-lands and meadows. "Zummer time! Why, it be no sort of time at all. Them folks in town be lazy. That's all as there's to it! I calls it a daft idea. Besides, it is nowheres near zomer time yet. What sort of weather d'you call this 'ere as we've bin having lately?"

What he said sounded so right that I turned the subject, asking after his "missus." But he passed me a look that left no doubt that he suspected me of being one of those folks likely to side a little with the "daft" idea.

"Summer time" is just a move on of the hands of the kitchen clock, and how easily the illusion can be played on most of us! Except on the man or woman who has to work by the sun—especially the smallholder and the poultry-keeper. It's true the hen will be off her perch soon after dawn in any case. But this can be accom-

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modated by the scratching facilities of the modern poultry-house. A little forethought overnight and the birds will keep themselves busy and healthy scratching and pecking for grains scattered among the wheat-chaff litter on the floor. But when it comes to night-time, dusk and dusk only is shutting-up time for the laying hen. Defer that for an hour by juggling with the clock and you've put an hour on the day's work for the poultry-man and the farmer's wife, for nearly all farmers have their poultry nowadays.

Poultry pays like nothing else on the farm. You can take it as one of the surest indications of good layers to see a last half-dozen red-combed hens who, not ready for bed, prefer to hang around the hen-house door, jabbing at imaginary flies or giving their necks a last scratch over with their toes, or flecking the tip off such blades of young grass as take their fancy. The first on the perch is the over-fat hen or the mopey one, as anxious about securing a good place as a first-nighter at the theatre.

But if you want a little fun all on your own—for the wise poultry-keeper leaves such a job alone—try to drive a few hens in before they're ready for their roosting time. A short temper or lack of experience soon sets the cackles and squawkings of alarm going. Out from the house streams the whole flock of affrighted matrons, headed by cock-birds infuriated at such disturbance of the peace. To-morrow, and a few feathers bear a melancholy intimation that at least one good hen will lay eggs no more.



THE oaks are proving obstinate. They stand bare, sullen, in a rusty sulk. But the week's mixture of sun and showers has had a cosmetrical effect on all the belated fruit trees. Cherries, pears, plums, apples are a fine sight; avenues of young greenery bedecked in pink and white. How it is done, or who gives the word, is the abiding mystery.

Orchardists follow a superior craft. There's a lot to be learned. The sprayer and the pruning-knife require an apprenticeship to a high form of sanitary hygiene and surgery. Pests and cankers are arboricultural enemies as well as man's! The day isn't far distant when the culture of fruit will be regarded as one of the most honourable of professions for either boy or girl to take to. The tree is such a living thing.

Earlier in the season, the fruit-growers eyed their prospects with some anxiety. But they've changed their tune. A tardy blossoming takes the bloom out of the frost's range, so hopes run high of a magnificent "picking" later on. A mere matter of days settles the fruit-buds' fate once the buds distend. Let a warm sun follow a wild, wet spell and insects hatch out and the bees take to wing. Their eclectic appetites and tastes may seem a fragile mechanism to employ; a haphazard system that relies upon the zigzag flying of a brimstone butterfly. Fortunate it is that the same bright moments in a day that bend back the tinted petals of a bud, set the pollinating agents off on their myriad journeys. Theirs is now a race against time and tide. The quiet airs favouring the meandering course of the honey bee, drop by the evening to a calm that suits as well a frost's fingers out for mischief overnight. Let the weather play

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its tricks on either of them, the few hours the stamens hold open their offers of pollen or the pistil centre of the flower can receive it, and the one it sides with can claim the victory. Yet sometimes the same south wind that drives the poor, bedraggled bee to its hive whilst putting a gag over the white frost's cruel mouth so that neither can work their good or ill, plays knight-errant itself and bears upon its back the faintest particles of pollen, tree to tree. Unhappily in this case, only those flowers with their faces windward benefit, and the tree bears fruit for that season on the one side of it.

I know of a row of pear trees far too discriminating even when insect or wind do minister unto them. They bloom magnificently, and in due course shed their pretty petals till the ground about them seems spread all over with snowflakes. But never a pear. Or if there be, a small, shrivelled specimen on a tip-top bough. At one time I thought it might be some sucker roots, except that a whole row of trees could hardly suffer each from such complaint. But now it seems incestuous intercourse between pears is forbidden, and until either I, or a neighbour, plant the complementary sorts, my handsome, leafy avenue of blossoming boughs is doomed to barrenness.

So they tell me, for little I know about fruit trees, much as I would dote on them. I'm always promising myself to plant an orchard and tend it from the beginning. Perhaps I will, when within sight of the last twenty years! I'd be sorry to plant up trees and then be moved on before they had fruited generously. So one hasn't to be too old before setting about such a job, though ageing men and women make good orchardists.

One day to be, every one of the nation's schools will have not only their playing-fields but gardens and orchards about them. Acres and acres of them where once the slums stood, right in the heart of the towns. And the trees will bring the wild birds with them. Not only the commoner sorts, the finches, the robins and the wrens, but the warblers, the flycatchers and the yellow-hammers and woodpeckers as well.

Unless they be molested, birds do not purposely hold themselves out of the way of people. Theirs is a healthy reaction against an overdose of bricks and mortar. There are not many wild birds that one can't see one time or other through the season within fifty yards of the garden-gate of a house in the country. High above the din and chatter of the merry multitude, the coarsest ear can, as early as this, pick out the piping rehearsal notes of a pair of nightingales. And in this mood, they can't be any farther off than the wild cherry tree which the children turn into a tree-house because of its convenient branches.

A strange feature of the present season has been the contrast between the behaviour of the birds and their nesting, and the fruit trees and their blossoming. While the trees hesitated, the birds made up their minds early that it would pay to be getting on with things. Black-bird fledgelings were feathered weeks since. I'd been keeping an eye on that nest. So had a jay. She could perch on a thickish bough that gave her a good view down into it, set though it was in a dark thicket.

As the fledgelings fattened and feathered, so her visits to that overhanging bough became more frequent. She got her chance; or thought she had! Both mother and

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father were off the nest, the one after worms, the other a drink. The jay made a dash for it, the beak aimed at a fledgeling that, hearing the whirring of wings, stretched a lean neck up and opened its beak expecting a feed. But even at her drink, at the rain pool under the thicket, the hen blackbird had kept an eye on that jay. With a shriek and a whistle to her mate, so obvious an alarm, she met the jay, three times her bulk, on the wing.

Even by the time the cock blackbird had come to the rescue, the jay had lost a couple of those streaming tail feathers of hers! He managed to get in one or two nips before the jay decided the game wasn't worth the candle and was off with a squawk, the bully all over.

Hazard seems to be the undertone of all the gaiety among the branches.



THE bravest show of the daffodils is over for another year. But what a blaze of primrose everywhere, taking their place to some extent, though one feels always more grateful to the early flowers. They meant a lot to us at the time, forcing their way as they did through a much more reluctant soil. Cowslips are out. So are the bluebells in the wood. The cuckoo makes his note heard above everyone else. This week the swallows came back to the barn, sending a scout ahead the day before the rest appeared on the scene.

May-month's first peep over the hilltops was a delightful affair. The wild rabbits sat out in front of their burrow-holes in the banks in full force for an hour or two and revelled in it. Pear and plum are now in bud

and blossom. Only the forest trees hang back—the ash, the oak, the elm. But before the month is out they'll be in full leaf and we'll reckon it to be summer again.

As the cows graze they switch their tails as if the fly's bite already had a nip in it. Thundery weather working up from the south-east promotes this bite. When dark clouds roll up from that quarter against the wind, then we count on getting a real storm.

We made an interesting discovery yesterday. A grass snake, nearly a yard long, lives away in the recesses of a crack at the ground-level of the stone foundations of our old house. We caught him napping on the stone-flagged path that skirts it, stretched out at full length in a hot sun. He, or it may turn out to be a she, disturbed at our chatter as we turned the corner, made a bolt for it. With its head turned towards us all the while, it slithered away, flickering a forked fang at us and keeping up a faint sissing noise that struck me as about the most effective reproduction in sound of the essence of pure hate as could be conceived.

An old gander, mounted guard over a sitting goose in a shed on a neighbouring farm, gave me the same sort of welcome a few days ago when I unexpectedly looked in at the door. Only he was distinctly inclined to follow up his execrations with action that suited the word.

Just inside the mouth of the crack that the grass snake had chosen were a couple of sucked-out snail-shells. The young lettuce and seedlings were already pestered with slugs, so we decided to give the grass snake the run of the garden. A trial run, anyway. If the grass snake fails, we'll have to resort to a newly recommended remedy for the slug pestilence, viz. beer and bran on a

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board. It seems that slugs can't let "the drink" alone, and given a dance-floor into the bargain, keep up their revelries long and late enough for respectable people going to work to find them still at it.

The currant bushes have their enemies, blackbirds at the height of their sauciness just now, who torment both at bud and berry time. But friendlier visitants to the garden and orchard are making up for a good deal of others' misdeeds. The wind became soft enough and the sun warm enough for both bees and butterflies to venture out. The same cold winds that kept them in kept the fruit-buds back. A fortnight without frosts now, with some patches of warm sun thrown in, will make this one of the best fruit years on record. What signs there are, are mostly encouraging for a pleasant summer. One such sign is that the oak looks like being out before the ash. The old folk hold to it that there'll "only be a splash."

With us, lambing is finished with a good fall of lambs on most everyone's farm with a flock. Few sights gladden more a good farmer's heart than a contented flock of ewes and their offspring well through the lambing-time and now out on a luscious bite of young grass. And if he can bring up, averaging his singles and doubles, one-and-a-half lambs to the ewe, he'll be more than content; he'll be proud. But sheep have been "a bad trade" of late years. And so has wool. So bad that perhaps it is safe to say things can't get worse, so now's the time to hold on. There are men left who'd as soon think of breaking up their flock of sheep as they would of breaking up their own home. And if it comes to the one, it usually means the other, for their hearts "be in

sheep," as one such put it to me. But it's by no means every farmer who "can be bothered with sheep about the place," as they say. Pigs have their staunch advocates. To other men cows mean "cash every month with the milk cheque," and they prefer that to the battering that the all too uncertain live-stock markets can give a man. But whatever their preferences, and even their prejudices, may have been in the past, one has never known farming folk to be in such a quandary about "getting on with what'll prove to be for the best."

Still, there persists an undertone of almost indefinable confidence and a more marked readiness to be enterprising than perhaps ever before.



"DANDELION wine! No, I shan't abother with it this year, though 'tis many a day since I've seen such dandelion about. More like marigolds they be!" "I expect you'll be able to get hold of a drop presently from Mrs. Appleby over against Great Solsfield. She'll sure make some." "They takes too much picking for me now. Pr'haps another year! There's no tellun what us mightn' do next year!"

True enough, there is no telling, though all of us cannot help noticing that Widow Winsom's hair has gone quite white of late. She says herself she's not feeling as young as she was and it's tiring work, stooping to pick dandelions. Other years the children have been about to give her a hand with the picking, but now that the little school has had to break up she misses them for this and other things. "Something goes when they grow up so,"

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she says, moving a hand across her face as though to brush a shadow away. But there's been nobody quite like her in these parts for brewing home-made wines of every kind. Apple and plum, blackberry-tips and damson, sloe and potato, she has kept up this side-line of farmhouse hospitality "ever since the day Jim and me got married."

We've lived here for some years but have never seen "Jim." It seems "Jim died soon after me girl was born, and that's awhile ago now." One can never buy any of her wine. "I only does it so as to have something or other about the house for when the grocer's traveller calls or the corn merchant's man." Perhaps she does it even more to please the occasional visitors from London way. If ever Widow Winsom's wine comes to an end, there will be lots of us who will miss her saying, "I just would like yo' to taste a glass of this 'ere plum wine o' mine. It won't keep 'ee a minute."

And of course one waits "just for to taste it like," leaning against the old pump. About Christmas-time it meant that "you must come just inside a minute," if only to get the door shut against "the weather." But it wasn't only for that. It was no use pretending then to be in any sort of hurry, for you have time for talk on a farm in winter-time.

In May—there's still "a drop left"—one steps out into the sunlight holding the glass high to subject its bright contents to a lingering comment about colour and clarity before taking the ceremonial gulp. For such a drink is always a toast to her and her house, as well as being one of the goods things of life.

An oft-repeated formula of discreet inquiry invariably

reveals that "I haven't much of me damson left," or "dandelion," as the case may be. And she employs her meek courtesies reciprocally. "Don't you think as how it would have been better if I'd have left it to stand a while longer?" If ever it's your luck to be asked such a thing for the first time, don't be trapped into replying that it could be bettered in any way. Widow Winsom can be most disarming. As she says, "There can't be any harm in it, for you know just where it comes from, only dandelions and such-like!"



A FIRST-CLASS row has started up among us. That ancient controversy, the public's right to "a way," has, like a volcanic crater that was thought to be extinct, begun to belch smoke, with an occasional spark indicating the fires beneath. For years most of us have been using a certain short road as the nearer by perhaps five miles to both the stretch of shops and station. The farm through which the convenient road passes changed hands. For some of us the first intimation that a break had come in the old friendly understanding was a narrow escape from collision in the dusk with a locked gate set across to bar vehicular traffic.

We were rushing, as usual, to catch the Sunday post out. Frustrated, we had little to say that would bear repeating and began to make inquiries. Fortunately for our small community, this aggressive new-comer seems to be a bit out-of-date with his claims for tolls or compensation. We've been using that particular bit of road freely long enough to establish the public right to it.

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Political allegiances are forgotten, chapel-goers join with church-goers, the rich back up the claims of their poorer neighbours. We are all ready to fight to fix once for all our common right to that bit of road.

It has become part of our all too slender contacts with the amenities of civilisation. To lose it would be to step back still farther into isolation. None of us is in the mood nowadays for such reassertions of mere feudalism. Another symptom is the spreading war against tithe. We've been waiting for the excuse of bad times to strike at it. Farming districts that in the best of times had most reason to jib at these ecclesiastical exactions are now frankly unable to pay.

Their district county courts are literally choked with farming appellants against the threatened orders for distraints, now raining down on the arable areas of our countryside. Farm-workers are at one with their masters in this resistance. It is possible that their backing in this matter may tend to soften the arguments of the Wage Board committee rooms later on. It should not be forgotten.

Before the War, not many farmers owned their farms. The "livings" and the large landowner formed part of the same social inheritance. Tithe was paid mainly out of the income of the large estates. The amount of it also was still related to the rise and fall in the average of corn prices over a period of years. The War altered these things as it did many others. Working tenants bought their farms for one reason and another. Many had to, or get out. Most of them borrowed the money to do so. Tithe was then permanently fixed at practically war-time corn prices. As the estates were sold up, tithe-

rents were apportioned to each farm and to every field. Now, nearly half our farm lands are in the nominal ownership of men who find it difficult to pay the fixed charges of both mortgage-interest and tithe out of a business revenue that is as hardly-earned as it is variable.

The men in the past who paid the tithe usually "held" the living and counted it a sufficient reward to be considered socially important for doing so. The increasing number of those who are called upon to pay tithe to-day have their own living to make first, and tithe has become nothing but a burden and an exaction. The struggle will go on, for the battalions of resistance are being reinforced by all types of men who, perforce, as they pay expect the money's worth. Tithe defends itself only as a legal charge. It has shed its obligations with the passing of time. The care of the parish poor, the sick and the aged, as well as the teaching of the young and the ignorant, has to-day to be paid for out of the public purse. But such were the duties for which the receivers of tithe originally contracted!

So bit by bit the countryside seeks to release itself from customs and obligations that should have lapsed as naturally as the years they belonged to. But controversy gives place to content as the eye takes in the quiet loveliness around, in the evening light. Spring birds singing about one's ears and the indefinable fragrance of an old garden takes the sting out of most of our torments. Things fall into their place. Some things we feel we ought to keep on with. With others the time has evidently come for us to let go.



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EVEN the most inveterate town-dweller must have felt a twinge or two of longing for a peep at the countryside by this time. A posy of buttercups on a railway poster has more "pull" in it when an office slave chances to stop beside it to mop his fevered brow in a minor heat-wave than most of the other allurements holding up a finger to him on such a day.

Folk tell me their day-dreams. Some just want a holiday, a change from this, a change from that. But others have more tingle in their toes. A Labour Exchange had pinned one man down to a spot long enough. He'd start again at fifty and take his chance, though he "didn't know how the wife might like it."

From a back street in Islington a woman wrote as if she was one of a crowd jammed tight in a hole too small even for common decencies. She gave me the feeling that she was locked in, and from the outside. There seemed only one window to the place, and that was too small for anyone to crawl through; besides, it was so high up in the wall. Light came in, and a little air, but never the sun. Only a few shadows sometimes playing about the sooted bricks of an institution wall told her when the sky was clear.

But it was when six dark inches of a tall old pear's young shoot, which nodded now and then as it swayed to the wind, budded and burst into white blossom that this woman from a stricken couch in the slums put a pen to paper to let me know how unfair she thought it all was.

The pear tree did not grow in her garden. It grew in mine. It grows there yet, but the blossom has already gone. Whether or no there will be any fruit it's too early

to say. But should there be, I think it must belong to the likes of her. There's been so much in her life that was just unfair. The city got hold of her when she was still a young girl. They sent her to "service" from a village in Kent. A country complexion soon gathers kisses. A small family tugging at a skirt that was once a wedding dress, a husband who died from something or other and a lifelong struggle with the phantom monster of poverty; she was down towards the end of it all on her back in a London slum. And to think of pear blossom, well it just hurt.

As I write now it's high noon in the country. I can pick out the piping of a nightingale from the depths of a copse. Not twenty yards from me, a sparrow, if you please, has taken to bathing. Teams of farm horses have come down to the same pond, sleek with the eating of young grass. Fields this way and that, green or cultivated, wear a "Merrie England" look about them that I never remember seeing so evidently before. As I look out of my country window, I just can't grasp the meaning of the slums.

I have never seen my bit of England looking so lovely, so generous, so gay. The birds hardly know how to "contain" themselves, as we say. Someone has just walked in with "a pretty flower," the language of Jane. "A milkwort," says the lucky person in our household who has a name for every flower that grows.

We're building a wall with "winkle" stone, the local name of stone dug out from the stream bank. The children have claimed it for a castle. That's how their day goes. The stuff of their games, the material they can lay their hands on, is what the men around work

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with and get their living by. I know full well a day's work for the farm labourer is not just a bit of romance as he sees it. He's caught by the heel in so many other ways. All the same, the contrast between what I see when I press my nose against my window and what a young mother and her brood have to look out upon in the slums of London is very nearly the span, as I reckon matters, that must separate heaven from hell.

The woman's right: it's all so unfair. It happens to be all so unnecessary as well.



TO use a village phrase, "widow women" left with children to bring up usually develop amazing pluck. The day-after-day sort of pluck. Mrs. Pond is no exception. "Left with nothing, and four of 'em still at school," as a neighbour summed up the state of affairs. She has made a magnificent fight of it ever since the death of her husband.

Morning after morning, after packing the children off to school—and it's a two-mile walk for them—she tramps past our windows "as reg'ler as clockwork," according to the roadman, on her way to this house and that to do the "chores" for one and another of us. The widow's pension pays the rent and keeps the children in clothes. She goes out washing for the rest, which accounts for the stoop in her walk maybe. A great day in her life was when she guessed the correct weight of the pig at the local flower show, but she was not more pleased about it than the rest of us were. The common opinion was that "no one deserved it better," meaning

not the pig so much as her taste of good luck. One man took the pig home for her, while a near-by farmer provided the sty. The local butcher bought the fattened pig from her in the end, and forgot to haggle about the price.

No feuds can be more bitterly waged than the spiteful feuds of the country parish. Village hovels and a long winter's mud dragging on one's feet nourish a nastiness that seems almost evil at times. But the generous, the friendly is more often uppermost. Who is it who pays the baker's bill for Mrs. Pond? All she knows is that he has orders to leave four loaves a week at her house which are paid for! I'll warrant those loaves are left on her doorstep as much out of respect as of charity.

In another direction, perhaps ten miles away, a woman farmer, with as much need as the rest of us to keep an eye on her accounts, finds time and the best kind of milk for all the nursing mothers and the infant babies of the place. In fact, they set a high standard for the bulk of the farm produce that she sells elsewhere.

Nearer home, a rural police officer reaches the age limit. The man who has poked his head round nearly all our cow-stalls and piggeries at every hour of the day and night, who has worried nearly every one of us at some time or the other about dog licences and cattle movement orders, is to retire into private life. Someone has provided him with a cottage and garden in the village he knows best: the rest of us club together for "a bit of a testimonial." I couldn't tell you whose idea it was, but it is just the sort of thing that keeps alive a communism amongst us which is neither systematic nor sectarian; only friendly and human. And it is an inter-

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course that is as naturally woven into our days as our work in the fields or amongst the stock.

Here and there attempts to farm from the office are being made. Enterprise has tried to lay impatient hands upon the casual and opportunist methods of a generation reluctant to be as business-like as prosperity would demand. There's no money in farming. Everybody has said so for so long that it has become difficult to believe there ever will be. But one has come across quite a number of shrewd folk lately who have made up their minds that there is likely to be.

One man has bought a couple of ancient water-mills to recondition them with the very latest machinery to grind wheat, English wheat, for bread, the offals to go back to the farms which grew it to feed cattle and pigs. Time was when these inland mills were the main industrial activity of a district thriving comfortably on well-farmed corn-lands. Many were closed down because easy-going contacts with increasingly hard-up farmers couldn't sustain the weight and drag of business credits which these involved. Others were taken over by competitive milling combines anxious to concentrate their operations in larger, modern-equipped units handling vast quantities of imported supplies—at some convenient seaport or other.

Now that the milling industry has been called upon to use a definite amount of home-grown wheat, the inland mills look like coming into their own again. That's the hope.



WHAT a difference one man can make to a village! Seven years ago a certain glebe farm was taken over by a man who was little less than a tyrant. (A few of us are still born that way inclined.) Glebe is usually the best land. "The Church" seldom made a mistake in the Middle Ages about temporal matters of that kind. Tithe, for instance, is still the most firmly established non-earning fixed charge in existence. And it will take a lot of getting rid of before it's properly finished with. Even the East Anglian rebels are ready to admit as much. The foundations for its exaction were as well and truly laid as an abbey's; possibly even better.

This particular farm "took up," as we say, all the available land in the place. No one could get even a rod or two for allotments, much less a cricket pitch or bowling green, without the good-will of whoever was farming "the Glebe." But there was no such thing as good-will about the man I'm talking of. He had one object in life, so it turned out. Men and land were just there to be used for what one could get out of them, and no more. You worked them both to the death, spending little more than you were "obliged," and then went on to another place, no matter where, and carried on more or less in the same way.

He kept very few able-bodied men on the farm as a matter of principle. They were either crippled or a bit "mental," or took a pension. No matter so long as they could do a day's work—and it had to be a day's work!—and he could get a certificate of exemption from the County Wages Committee to pay them less than the county rate of 30s. on the ground of their incapacity or

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infirmity. Able-bodied men in the village had no option but to go off to the brickyards or the towns.

Before he had finished, his horses and cows were a disgrace. So were the hedges. But that was all part of his system. He set out to make his farming pay that way, and unfortunately did. It was the next man who had to foot the bill. In five years he had finished "the Glebe." He went over the border, up country somewhere, but we still hear "bits" about him. He goes on much as he ever did, except that while he was with us, his wife, with the same sort of eye to business, managed to get a daughter well married.

In the country, you don't have to look far for essentials. Times without number I've watched an old cripple hoeing a clay field in June, a wilderness of weed and as hard as a road. Soon after would pass a chattering, merry couple on a pair of upstanding chestnuts, habited fashionably, making homeward for lunch after "such a nice ride on the Downs." The girl had looks; we all admitted it. But we also knew what the game was. We all waited for it to come off, as it did.

Still, I've never got rid of the idea that the old cripple and his like on that farm had to pay up for what must have been a most exhausting and expensive climb into "Society." But for two years now "the Glebe" has been in other hands, and most happily with other ways.

The first thing young Farmer Cornstalk did was to reopen a footpath for the children to get a short cut to the school. He has children himself, though the path is not for them. Nobody got the sack, but a few others, of a more active age, were taken on. A couple of cottages were built, the first since the War. Cornstalk stirred the

Council up about the notion. He wanted married men with the horses. They weren't so likely to leave.

It soon got round that "the boss" was one of the right sort. Spring came and two men, one near enough sixty, the other less than half that age, relatives both of a county pro, broached the subject of a cricket pitch. Sussex has its cricket deep-rooted in village greens. And for that matter, now I come to think of it, so has Shropshire, where I once lived. But there it was more a game for the farmers' sons at that time. The half-holiday on the farm has made a little difference, though the cowman cannot get off, and haymaking butts in rather awkwardly.

Cornstalk took the two sportsmen then and there to walk over a likely spot. He never said so, but the whole place knew that the square of turf he agreed to let the village use for a token rent of a penny a year is one of the best pieces on the man's farm. It's bang in the middle of a field that can "do" a bullock and a sheep to the acre, and there's not much land as good as that in Sussex.

Five oaks in a clump near the gate make a grand pavilion. The girls have taken to stoolball again, a game that was dropped for a generation. A tennis outfit will be next winter's pretext for whist drives and dances. They're talking of reviving the Flower Show now the village "has a field of its own." Gardening in a good season is as feverish a complaint as tonsillitis.

Weather, crops and cricket are a trinity for talk that keeps even scandal at arm's length. With the countryman, prowess is more often a local affair and none the worse for it either. And to have given the village back "a field of its own" is for Master Cornstalk to have presented the little place with a set of new lungs, and every

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fresh use of them that it makes adds to the man's praises.

Townsfolk may find it hard to believe, when they see so many villages well set in the centre of broad acres, that one thing that makes a deal of difference to village life is whether or not they have access to a bit of their own land. There are a good many that haven't. And for others the village green is a most fortunate legacy from a past in which common rights managed somehow to elude the private enclosure. A village must play as well as work or the young leave it, and that's a dreadful fate for any place.

SUMMER

"She loves me, she loves me not; she loves me, she——"
And so it goes on—a rune handed down from child to child by the pretty aid of just field-gathered posies, from such a long time ago. And no matter how old some of us become, the little song breaks out in our heads as, passing, we pluck at a golden-hearted Moon daisy bowing to us from beside the summer meadow's path.

Or perhaps it is "One o'clock, two o'clock," as we stoop for a dandelion and blow those downy spikes of mischief, whichever way the wind cares to carry them. But what's time to them, so lightsome that a mere ripple of a breeze serves the freedom won!

HOW the year speeds on! Already the cuckoo's call has a break in it. One wanted so much to come out of "the spring," but here we are almost at the time for the sun to turn southwards again with so little done. Early on we stayed our plans, picking over the days, but those we counted upon came so unpunctually and so seldom that there is no longer any time to lose. We must get down to our tasks.

Nature knew better than us, and went on with the quiet swelling and spreading of bud and blade with the shrewd distrust of an "old hand." Too many years at the game to be caught, she could have told us that it never does pay to wait about for the sun to come out from that overhanging pall of cloud. That was hardly her business anyway. She had her own affairs to look after.

Yet, like some lolling wiseacre at his evening door, puffing a contented pipe, one can catch a few moments with her for advice just before sleepy dusk falls into night's arms. She'll tell you then how much the days meant to her, and how little. And that old Blenheim apple tree wears what looks to my admiring eyes a chuckle on her wrinkled face, covered as she now is from head to foot with pink-white blossoming. I'm certain that she knows that she has beaten wind and frost and sulky sun yet once again.

And the old, old house under her shade knows too. There they stand looking into each other's eyes like the intimates they are. The pair of them older than any man alive, a "Darby and Joan" from days when, along the straight lane, now but an overgrown green "gallop," rumbled the smugglers' carts on their way from Rottingdean to London in the night. That old house and its

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gnarled and twisted friend have stood up to too many storms to fret about a disappointing spring.

Both brick and lichened limb have the same weathered look, slightly quizzical, but tolerant and comforting. The old moon beams down at them both now and then, and all three of them exchange the same sort of comprehensive glances behind a pair of young lovers' backs.

During the days now, in the barn, Tyler, the shepherd, is shearing the sheep. Coat off and perspiring from the stress of his job, he keeps a steady run of talk with whomsoever comes along. There's something pathetic about the sheep's look of mute acquiescence as, turned this way and that, she is rudely postured to suit the shearer's skill. And more pathetic still, when a bunch of shorn ewes rejoin a bleating, joyful batch of lambs, quite certain till then they'd somehow lost both mother and milk for good and aye. Baaing and bleating they seek each other out afresh, the ewe awkward in her new nakedness, sniffing the bunting lamb well over as though wondering if in this world of change this child of hers had changed as well.

Down the road they're using mechanical clippers. Already Tyler's has become the less frequent sight, and to my mind denotes the closing of an agricultural epoch in more distinct a way than the change in any other farming practice in our day. From the nomadic pastoral days till now the shepherd's shears have kept their pattern and their craft. The shepherd's was an art learned in the cradle of mankind. Something really historical happens when Tyler lays down his simple implement for the last time.



“NOBODY else’s fault but his own!” Yet as I watched a motley group, mostly the shabbier sort of dealer—for farming folk were too busy haymaking to attend the sale—moving slowly from lot to lot of his auctioned effects, one wondered.

Mr. Kingford, farming about 120 acres of the best land available anywhere, had gone bankrupt after being at the place for close on ten years. “What was his rent? Nigher £4 an acre than £3, until he kicked about it last year, and got about £60 a year knocked off, but too late to do himself much good.” “Still, he must have made it better for the next chap!” Sorry comfort for unfortunate Kingford, I thought.

On opening the sale, the auctioneer explained to the ladies and gentlemen present: “I am selling the whole of Mr. Kingford’s live and dead farming stock without reserve, under instructions from H. M. Allbutt, Esquire, by order of the County Court.”

From the beginning to his closing—“Well, that’s the lot for this afternoon, gentlemen, and a rough lot it’s been”—this uncouth man kept up a flow of almost offensive facetiousness. Confessing right away his ignorance of the value of farming stock, live or dead, he announced that he “had arranged for Mr. Kingford to be available for any information that any of the company present might require.”

“How long since you paid £150 for this milking machine outfit, Mr. Kingford?” “Less than three years,” was the reply, but it was knocked down for £16 10s. before his shrinking eyes. The gossip on the edge of things was obviously neighbourly. “Why, the lad used to work from four o’clock of a morning till it

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was time to go t'bed and even then never seemed to have as much of a suit of clothes fit to get about in like other farmers' sons."

Time and again the up-to-dateness of several of the implements set one thinking. A walk-through bath to douche the feet of sheep against foot-rot, a milk-recorder, salt-lick holders for the cows, automatic potato planter and potato digger, a 5 h.p. Hornsby engine in the barn. Was it the father or the son whose wit conceived the over-costly purchase of such labour-saving devices? Or did they both consort together to ease themselves of a little of the daily drudge by such seductive chances as the "pay-as-you-work" instalment system holds out, while sitting around a winter evening's fireside? The cow-stall was an eye-opener! The new man was "pleased at the cow-stall." So I heard him telling a friend. But it wasn't the structure that opened my eyes. It was the sight of four aged cows, waiting their turn to go under the hammer—all that was left of a herd of thirty.

One could read the story of Mr. Kingford's "fault" in those empty stalls, and in the familiarities of a couple of cattle-dealers that seemed to know their way about the place only too well. I listened to one chuckling to the other over his purchase of "a 1927 Ford motor-car for twenty-six bob, and young Kingford started it up for me!" Somehow I felt an intense loathing for the man creeping over me, and had to turn away.

"Nigger," the Dutch cow with too many tell-tale rings for years upon her handsome horns, made top price, but little enough, and the sight of a police-sergeant, "clothed with a little brief authority," solemnly making out a foot-and-mouth licence before this aged

and bewildered beast could be allowed to move a dozen yards down the road seemed to overweight the seriousness of the proceedings.

A laugh with West, the one-armed lorry-owner waiting about for chance loads, at the important air assumed by Buzfuz for so slight an occasion made me feel sane again. A chat on the way home with Jem Harrod, the mole-catcher, put me in possession of the facts about Kingford's business affairs. "The man didn't have enough money to start on. He couldn't afford to keep any labour, and the farm got on top on 'em like."

Ancient human Jem, he "felt so sorry to see 'em go." I left Jem feeling he'd be sorry to see most of us "go," though, as he says, "there be those about who, when a man's down, makes it their business to keep 'im down."



"THE varments!" Joe was surveying the slaughter of the currant bushes. But before I had time to add my support to his deep feelings the vicious jab behind Joe's ejaculation was answered by a mocking trill from a marauding blackbird not ten yards from us. Out she flashed like a dark streak from under a red-currant bush at the sound of his infuriated voice, just as if she thought she had better be off if the man really felt as badly about the matter as all that. She'd been listening right enough, tilting her jaunty head this way and that. There was a laugh in her note. She didn't care a rap for either of us, flitting away over the hedge with the sauciest air imaginable. She wasn't leaving those rich, flaming currants alone for long, and was ready to go on

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matching her wits against man's for the taste of them as long as they hung there.

Perching on the topmost bar of a field-gate on the other side of the farmyard, she kept an eye on us. Were we likely to do anything? She'd like to know. "Not that you can do much to stop me. There are plenty of other things coming on in the garden I can get at." She bounced this out from one end of the gate to the other and back again. She knew what we were looking at. The ground was strewn red with the wasted berries of her greedy wantonness. Fortunately, the white currants seemed immune. At any rate, so far. Is it that birds have an eye for colour? One would think so, to watch a hen discriminating at feeding-time in favour of the yellow maize.

It was a disconsolate day altogether for poor Joe, for had I seen "the peas and beans t'other side of the garden? You'd never believe the mess they be in. But that's jays 'as 'ave adone that!" I had a look at the peas and beans. In fact this season a good many gardening folk round about keep on having what Joe calls "a look at the peas and beans." We've been wondering not a little what to do about "them jays." And so are some of the poultry-keepers for that matter. They've been losing quite strong chicks, and in broad daylight.

According to Joe, old Johnson over at "Red Acre" "shot a couple of 'em down t'other day." If he didn't add, "and good luck to him," he meant it. But he hadn't managed to get hold of a certain elusive mole in the frame. There was no doubt Moley was having nothing to do with the trap set so regularly for him. Meantime, the cucumbers were not looking at all well

after such disturbed nights with Moley so persistently nosing his way among their rootlets.

In fact the whole garden looked a trifle dishevelled after a boisterous night, unusual for so late in the year as July. What few apples there were—and yet more than one liked to see—lay scattered about. Brookman had complaints to make on that score as well, but was getting more concerned about his winter-sown oats—the sparrows were after them already. Altogether, it sounded a little as if there was a war on. First the slugs in the gardens in the early part of a wet and dull season, with the fly getting at the swedes in the fields. Then a few days of warm, ripening sun, and that class of enemy beats a temporary retreat, only to give place to feathered battalions doing their deadliest long before it is reasonable to expect even the most exemplary among us to be out of bed of a morning.

Long as they are, the days are hardly long enough for all there is to do just now without having to bother with pests and nuisances. Bartle declares that “it’s the hedges encourages ’em.” But farming is an incessant business, anyway. The showery weather that may be spoiling the mown grass in the one field may turn out to be the summer’s most suitable chance to distribute fertiliser to the best effect upon a field already “carted.”

Ben, seated on the mower but yesterday, spent to-day “spreading some ‘monia’ in an adjoining meadow to bring on the more quickly a fresh ‘bite’ for the cows.” Ragged as his pay, Ben remains amongst the indispensable of our race, though it sounds the merest rant to say so, treated as he is by the rest of us.



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“SHE loves me, she loves me not; she loves me, she——” And so it goes on—a rune handed down from child to child—by the pretty aid of just field-gathered posies from such a long time ago. And no matter how old some of us become, the little song breaks out in our heads as, passing, we pluck at a golden-hearted Moon daisy bowing to us from beside the summer meadow’s path. Or perhaps it is “One o’clock, two o’clock,” as we stoop for a dandelion and blow those downy spikes of mischief, whichever way the wind cares to carry them. But what’s time to them, so lightsome that a mere ripple of a breeze serves the freedom won!

And now the dark looks of the threatening thistle show up in the young corn and through the lengthening grass of fields laid down for hay. June’s roses came first on the wild hedges. Hot sun, and the dragon-fly sips at the pond’s edges. The leaves of the tardy ash are now as dark as the oak’s, and for both, as for most things, summer has taken full charge of the young season. The tulips’ beauty is shed. The sprawling grandeur of a neighbouring hydrangea wanted elbow room, so, like the even gentler daffodil before it, she sank back into the still cool earth, keeping her strength for another day.

On the farm, wheat is the proudest crop. There will be a story to tell about wheat a few weeks from now, harvest yields that will make history in the market-place later on. One isn’t so sure about the roots. The sheep may have to go a bit short come February if a few top showers don’t soon come along to set the tiny swede seed and kales going in the dry tilth. Already the forecasts are pretty certain about hay in this part of the country. “What there is will be good, but there won’t

be half enough of it time you'm allow for buttercups, which don't make no sort of hay." Buttercup is a bitter-sweet, a pretty face with a sour taste, and a summer which gives it as good a chance to show up as this one makes it just as plain to even the most obstinate or impoverished of landowners just what's wrong with a good half of the grass-lands of England.

"A good coat of lime's what's needed, and a little more of the water let away in the winter-time." The old hands know. One doesn't deceive a proper countryman about his own job. But few can afford it. The more desperate among them are becoming impatient. They've let the land go until it can hardly get worse. And now it's the men's money which begins to tempt them. It is a last straw which won't keep the man in need of it very long afloat. But there are optimists, men who shake their heads at such cut-throat remedies. They even dare to contest the older men's creeds at their meetings for reasons that are as up-to-date as you can hear anywhere.

We need some new blood in the farming industry, a few minds handling its affairs, not too respectful of its stupid habits, and not afraid to knock over some of the petty prerogatives of cantankerous old men used to having their own way over a very small area. They'll have to be knocked over by somebody. They talk as though nobody else had the right to go farming but the man brought up to it. What they forget, and all too often, is that the people who have perhaps more right to go farming than even they are just those who want to find their way back to it as a way of life. And what a lot of these there are. And how difficult we make things for

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them. It's far easier to find your way into a town from the country than the other way round. There are practically no sign-posts to direct one, no guides provided, or very few, to keep a townee's high heels or glacé kid out of the pitfalls or the ruts.

One man writes me asking his way to an acre of land. He hears there are millions of wasted acres somewhere or other. Another "would like to settle down if only we could find a little place in the country." It is not always as hard. Some manage to find their way. Looking through a country-woman's diary that has come my way, I read: "My jam-making experiment turned out a fair success." A date nearer June: "Such lovely sunny weather. The guelder roses are a blaze of yellow." And yet there are moments when she has her doubts. "These sunny Saturdays make me envy town people who can shut up their desks and hie away to tennis; always the idea fades away like a passing crow."



"I THINK as how there's a coot with young 'uns on that pond!" I answered that I wasn't the least bit surprised even though the pond was right against the barn from which Pixie, the barn-cat, might be expected to "get at 'em," to use young Joe's own words.

One works and walks about the fields in early June with eyes that look this way and that expectantly. Something new may rise from the grass at one's very feet at any moment, or from the hedge that skirts the public path. A frightened fluttering at one's approach and a covey of brown and speckled partridge chicks are

scattering in every direction. One of them lies panting, caught in the jungle of a lump of sedge, still beating its tiny wings, helpless before the Terror that it now expects will strike it down.

Turning over a winter-made dungle of muck and rubbish for the marrow bed disturbs a sleek and slumbering grass-snake. "There goes a blind-adder," shouts an excited Joe, his short fork striking the ground well behind a wriggling streak of green which makes a good escape through tufts of hemlock, nettle and blue periwinkle.

Not long after and Joe was calling the children to come and have a look at a pair of baby snakes coiled round and about each other as though the other was the only certainty in this new and noisy world.

Another morning recently and Joe's voice had the note of triumph in it. He'd got the varmint at last—a mole caught in Joe's patiently constructed trap. When I saw it lying there on his hand, with a red tip of fresh blood upon the upheaving snout, somehow I couldn't make myself feel as sure as Joe about the triumph of the occasion, though never doubting that he was right to set so high a price on such a wanton's antics in the carrot-bed. I felt Joe give me a second look. I fancy he noticed my lack of ardour now the deed was really done. But how could I tell him that since the day a certain small girl introduced me to "Moley" at the children's play last Christmastide, I've always known him as a sort of friend of ours?

We met at "Toad Hall." "Ratty" was there too. Every time I hear a "plomp" down by the stream I find myself saying that it's "Ratty" the water-mole happy in his river, as merry a fellow as lives, and as harmless. The

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same stream provoked a droll scene the other day. Two proud hens, foster-mothers to a strange hatch for them, strutted their duckling broods around the fields with such proud airs as to leave no doubt that they fully appreciated the distinction. But one fine morning the well-grown ducklings found the stream, and plunged gaily in before the horror-stricken eyes of their fond attendants. Since then the ducklings manage for themselves with the poor foster-mothers on the bank keeping up a show of parental responsibility for such queer offspring.

The brook-meadows provide the best feed for the cows just now. One has only to put a hand upon the gate and every creature's head is turned, hopeful that you've come to turn them in to the knee-deep succulence of the summer's grass. Cows know and distinguish the quality of a bite with a ready disposition to go the way of their preference. One field is not the same as any other field to a cow anyway!



NOTHING matters half as much as a drop of steady rain when it is wanted. For days Peter talked hopefully about "messenger" clouds, flecks of white like a few odd bits of swandown blown out of a nest that is finished with. I'm not such a weather wizard. A tap on the glass before I hazard a forecast. "Let's see what the glass says." Clouds setting in from the north may not mean anything. And by "anything" we mean a rain that gets down to the little nodules that the white potato flower above ground tells us are there

ready to make a big push, with clods to deal with as stubborn as ours are.

It may be a queer notion of mine, but plant-life which gets its living in the way potatoes, carrots, parsnips and the like have to, must be capable of putting more than just food into one's stomach.

Virtues such as a dull sort of courage rooted in modesty may not be altogether self-made. A lot may depend upon the kind of food we eat or can afford; our place in life may depend upon accidentals of that kind much more than we think. I'd rather like to discuss the idea with anyone who may have given more thought to the same notion. The Chinese may be quite a different proposition when meat and wheat figure regularly on their menus. Serf-like peasants and a plain diet, mainly potatoes, may serve to keep a whole race down. A little gravy might be enough to start a revolution.

Bees have no troubles about royal blood. If a chill should happen to carry off the occupant of the throne before she has had time to nominate her successor, then, so I understand, the commoners can so add to the deportment and potency of one of their own selection by special feeding that the dignities and offices of hive-life go on as before.

Anyhow, a nice rain has given a new lease of life to "most everything." Peas in the pod will fill out, a happy ending to a dry spell. It's Peter's theory, and he gets it from a man nearly twice as old as himself (and he's fiftyish), that "y'can't water peas: it's only a hoe does 'em any good in a drouthy time," and I daren't gainsay him.

We kept our few strawberries going that way, only

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to find that something was getting at them in spite of wire-netting. Can it be mice? An evil spirit enters into one at the mere thought of it. Another enemy has been harassing the feathered members of our kingdom of late. "A weasel right enough. Caught sight on him up against the pigs' trough in broad daylight." Well, if that's so, this weasel is a proper marauder. A pair of treasured ducklings, with a pond all to themselves, were literally caught napping. The little owner, whose knowledge of life's harsher moments is so far limited to petulant assertions of playmate rights to toys, or "the biggest piece" at table, shrank back aghast at such blood-thirsty evidence of wanton cruelty as the torn neck and discarded corpse of "poor duckie Aylesbury."

Again and again she came back with her puzzle, "but why should weasel——" Parsons fill out many a pulpit hour trying to explain much the same phenomenon. Listeners may be fingering wound-scars they never deserved.

Another day, and a bunch of hens, scratching for the least of the grains lodged in the earth's cracks, jumped up as if a land-mine had blown them sky-high, shook out a good many frightened feathers, and scuttled away for safety-perch. Master Weasel, having tasted blood, will hang around until he tastes some more—or we get his. Young rabbits, and there are plenty of them this season, are his real quarry. He hunts them insatiably until such a harrying trims the wits of the warren, and he is obliged to move on farther afield.

The life of Mrs. Coot is made miserable for a like reason. She brought off seven chicks. They were on the water within an hour from leaving the shell. But there

are only four left. You can tell what they've been through as a family by the instantaneous, simultaneous dive under they make if they get but a glint of your coming. We put down the source of Mrs. Coot's worries to rats, and are doing what we can to strike a blow on her behalf, with a certain amount of success.

But the farmyard has its friends. We caught sight of a hedgehog at work the other night in the full moon, poking his snout into a likely pile of rubbish for grubs, ants' eggs and even snakes' eggs, a possible delicacy. Hedgehog is a great worker on behalf of the insect birth-control movement, and although tales are told by cow-men and others about certain of his indiscretions, he has done a lot of good in his time, and we welcome visits from such an unceremonious worker in this cause.

A few newts in the well set up a domestic discussion. You make that sort of discovery about the water supply when you live in the kind of outlandish place we do. So dependent on well-water are we, that if the authorities were to tell us it was not fit for human consumption, it would simply mean the abandonment of a home that has uncommon features about it, and has stood as a dwelling-place not far short of three hundred years.

And yet less than a mile up the road is a water company's main, which gets as far as the manor house and the rectory, and no farther. We feel more strongly about that than little Rachel does about weasels, even.



ON a farm there are so many ways of looking at things. A farmer talks about being ruined by low corn prices, oats, and barley particularly just now. But

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he doesn't shout half as loudly about the fact that cheap oats and barley used at home keep the millers' bills at bay, besides giving a more wholesome feed to his young cattle and pigs.

It takes a lot really to ruin a farmer. Economists advising world statesmen have found that out. According to a good deal of their data he ought to have been ruined years ago. They've wanted him ruined in fact. To their way of thinking, if ruin had only driven a few thousand men out of farming all over the world, cattle and corn and cotton would have become scarce, and primary produce prices would then have risen.

Orthodox economists have been rather hoping that the regular farmer everywhere would be driven out of business by the continuous fall in prices for his produce. But it hasn't worked out so. When wheat prices began to drop, the grower of wheat scratched his head a little, bought better seed for the same money or less than in other years, borrowed some credit to buy machinery to cultivate more ground more efficiently, and increased his yields by his own enterprise by perhaps a couple of bushels an acre.

In Canada, Nature came along as well, lent a hand with just the right weather for a good harvest, and the farmer got another bushel an acre for nothing. That is what is likely to happen throughout Britain this harvest. The Government has told the farmer he can reckon on a price of about 45s. a quarter for his wheat, quite a comfortable price, you believe me, for the best of times. The Government's experts have based their calculations on a yield round about four quarters to the acre. But wheat looks like being the crop of a generation this season, with

yields round about five quarters to the acre, for which extra quarter the farmer will have done nothing except, maybe, thank God for it being "just the right season for wheat."

Or, possibly, even the farmer has become modern enough to pat himself on the back for a bit of good luck, content to leave it at that. Anyhow, that extra quarter for nothing will pay his rent and leave a trifle over for wages.

The labourer will find that he's got a deal more harvesting to do, as the straw is going to be long and heavy, but it will make very small difference to his wages. Possibly a little "overtime," but he mustn't reckon on much of that this year. The farmer is keeping a keen eye on wages. And what the economist found to be true of the wheat-grower has been as true about potatoes, milk, cheese, fruit, eggs and the rest. As prices have fallen, the farmer has managed to increase yields to off-set the falls.

In the meantime, quite a lot of townsfolk, here and in the States, have been taking to farming as a more soul-satisfying and assured livelihood than the insecurities of a cash-desk or counter. This has all helped to make matters worse from the point of view of the orthodox economists. It's a queer world where the economist would rub his hands with a peculiar sort of satisfaction on hearing that a few thousand farmers had gone into a really absolute condition of bankruptcy. If such a prospect were actually in sight, world statesmen would pull up their chairs to the Conference table with the animated air of men down to business at last. But the farmer steadily refuses to be ruined, and every State, with the

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possible exception of Free State Ireland, sets out on a policy of salvation for its agriculture (and nobody else's) which only prolongs the agony of world depression, according to the tenets of the economist.

Anyhow, they are pretty nigh satisfied by this time that if they wait until a sufficient number of farmers throughout the world are well and truly ruined by all the ordinary rules of commercial bankruptcy, they will have to wait a deal longer for the trade depression to end. So, during the next few weeks we shall hear a lot about expert plans to control the production of food, all designed to restrict the full marketing of available supplies. Farming is to be carried on only by some form of official licence in the future, and the licensed grower of our victuals will then be paid as much for what he doesn't grow as for what he does.

All this sort of thing comes from not being able to ruin the farmer by the normal application of economic laws which, when in operation, shut down factories and close up shops. It gives one to think. There is something pernicious about it all somewhere.

Not far from me there is an old trug-maker, making baskets for either gardening or shopping. He's been at it for a lifetime, and he can't make enough of them. He beats even the gipsies at the game because they only come and go. On fine days he works outside in the sunshine, shaping saplings cut out of a wood which overhangs his workshop.

He works and talks to a philosophy. He works to capacity. He works for utility. He has a standard of exchange which is fundamental. He asks that the labour of his skilful hands shall assure his right to daily bread

and a pipeful of a certain old-fashioned brand "afore bed-time." His measure of value is a trug-basket. It should be worth at least as much bread as it was when he "were 'prenticed as a lad."

The economist and the trug-maker have their ideas about putting the world right. I'm inclined to side with the trug-maker because most people still need a basket to go shopping with, and the world, as I see it, needs more food, not less.



RURAL England in parts is as reluctant to open its heart to the townsman stranger as ever it was. I have just come back from a trip that started out from the foothill fortresses of Derbyshire, across the green hummocks of Leicestershire and out eastwards nearly to the shallows of the Wash. Throughout the journey it struck me that the motor was getting over quite a lot of ground without adding the least bit to the stock of mutual understanding between town and country.

A tramp sitting by a milestone, "giv'n the feet a rest," got to know more about that corner of Derbyshire than we did that morning. The roadman could tell him. He merely touched the brim of an old hat with a finger as we passed—a misleading gesture of deference. It wasn't respect; perhaps it was a mixture of habit and cunning. I felt that the tramp and the roadman were exchanging confidences. They knew what was going on. We didn't, though we could see over a lot more hedges and could count a good many more roofs than either of them.

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Rutland seemed sluggish. The men in the fields used their hoes reluctantly. The heavy land was a foe. The sullen folk must be pretty sure of you before they'll speak their mind out. Women with empty shopping baskets waited about on the road corners for buses to come along, without a smile on their faces. They never looked for a lift. They kept their old heads bent. A hunting country, they were used to galloping horses passing by. These might ride over you if you got in the way.

In the Fen country the land looked friendlier. A fatter kind of soil altogether. Men's hoes moved more industriously. There were fewer squires and more sugar-beet. One could evidently make an easier living out of potatoes than out of poaching. The cottages were huddled near the chapels, a pretty good sign as a rule. They are so in Devonshire.

All the same, though the folk may not be as sullen, they seem almost as shy. They have little to talk about, until your ears are well out of hearing, and then they've a good deal. In those parts the land-worker is more self-confident than most. And just at this moment there is a perceptible hardening in his feeling towards the farmer as paymaster and "boss." A farm-worker doesn't find it necessary to look over "the boss's" books to know how much a farmer can afford to pay the men. He takes a look over the fields.

Sugar-beet has been enjoying a subsidy for some years. It has now reached the stage when every man who works on it knows it to be a paying crop. That wasn't always so, even with the subsidy. There wasn't enough good seed about, and farmers treated it as merely a "cleaning"

crop. Now they grow beet for its own sake, and the money that's in it.

The wheat subsidy has been going for some time now. The men see already that it has done the farmer "a bit o' good," and that, as prospects are, he's likely to do even better out of it this coming season.

Potatoes are a rare crop again. Already the Lincolnshire "earlies" have been cleared off at £12 and £15 a ton, and some four to six tons to the acre. Showery weather, and the cabbage plants have since covered the broken balks to catch an autumn market for green-stuffs. But the men know as well as the masters that even "main crop" potatoes look like making a fair price later on. It may not be their proper business to discuss farmers' schemes for marketing at "Union" meetings, but it's being done all the same, and perhaps a shade more thoroughly than the farmers tackle such subjects themselves.

Strawberries have not done so badly, either, in the Fen country. And more bulbs are grown in Lincolnshire's new "Holland" nowadays than by the side of the Zuider Zee.

A year or two back and man and master shared common doubts about their industry's capacity to pay. A townsman was on thin ice who tried to rouse a village audience to some show of enthusiasm when he set about threshing the scandal of farm wages. He's still to show that he knows a little of what he's talking about, but the men can begin to see a lot more and a deal farther for themselves. "The farmer's beginning to get it all roads. And he don't look like wanting to part wi' any on it. Well, us'll have to see that we make'n." When you meet him, and one must pay a visit to some out-of-the-

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way corner of East Anglia to do that, you will find that the agricultural worker and the miner share much the same qualities. The Durham coal-field and the Norfolk corn-fields have a lot in common.

I want to set it on record in these notes of mine that, in my opinion, the farm-workers of England at any rate, and there are a good half million of them, are going to assert themselves industrially and, as likely as not, politically, in the not very distant future.

You mark my words, and watch Norfolk and Lincolnshire. Quite a chunk of the future will be hewn out of a rich earth there before we are much older.



SOME of the best hay ever made has been got together in the last few days. Here and there has fallen a thunder-shower that was most welcome. It freshened things up and cleared the air a bit. Thunder-showers are growing showers. Partly because they're warm and the land's thirsty. But not altogether that. I had it lately from a gardener, the sort of man who, before daring to advance his private theories on the work of creation, prefaces his opinion with the intimation that he "keeps on turning things over" in his head. This man believes that thunder-showers are electrically charged to an exceptional degree, and that is probably why "they seem to do s'much good to the ground." Such a notion strikes me as offering tremendous possibilities for the future to work at.

I only regret I don't know enough about it. That's about all he gets from me. When it comes to gardening

matters, I leave things to him; for whatever may be so about thunder-showers, I believe something of the same sort to be true about his finger-tips. Every seed he sows seems to come up; every seedling or cutting he plants out seems to thrive, and once he has knocked a weed over the head—well, that's the end of it.

Such men are the giants of our race. How or why some of us succeeded in clambering into the limelight of reputation or the seats of power when many of the obviously first-class among us are hardly known beyond the boundaries of three parishes, appeals to me as one of the things the angels chuckle most about. That's partly why I believe in an after-life. One doesn't see everything that is going on by looking out of a window. One is too much on a level with it all. And, having put up with the fuss of life, one should at least be compensated by being allowed to see the funny side of all one's floundering and flummery. I really don't see how that becomes possible until afterwards. Unless, of course, that's what old age is for.

Rushing the other night to catch the post to fix an appointment for the next day that I didn't keep after all, I passed an old woman in the green lane picking flowers. She'd have been dubbed a witch in other days. Her shrivelled hands were full of sheep's parsley and periwinkle tangled about with wild tares, plucked out of the hedgerows with all the zest of a child. There wasn't five feet of her, and she couldn't have weighed a pound more than four stone. Not a sign did she make as I trotted past her. But on my return she was on the look-out. Stepping up out of the ditch, she waited my evening greeting and then waved her nosegay in front of my face.

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Such an old creature might have been deaf; she might have been dumb, but she said as plain as one being can speak to another, and without opening her mouth, "Thou fool."

I walked the rest of the way home across five or six fields, asking myself what on earth I had been running for. Still, I kept the rebuke to myself until now, for there are evidently wiser folk about than myself.

Holiday-makers don't choose our lanes for their leisurely recuperations without good reason. It's the visitor who would stay here for ever. Tell them your troubles and they "wonder what on earth you've got to worry about with all this blissful peace about your ears all day long." Sounds a bit like a woman, and it was. The day was all bird-song and sunshine. June had brought the flowers along late but lavishly, and to-morrow she must face London again. Theatrical managers were more off-hand than ever. Producers simply wouldn't see anyone, and after six months on tour one had lost touch a little. How easy, how delicious to stay on and keep out of that battle for a while. Here, on this grassy slope under the oak with a gentle breeze coming over those hills from the sea.

But d'you think those five old ducks swimming around on the pond at your elbow are going to let you lie there all day long doing nothing? Not they! As soon as the man comes to feed them, they'll want you out of their way, for it's nigh enough to their feeding-place you've chosen. Otherwise there'll be no eggs in the morning. And after all, what do you think we keep the ducks for?



SUMMER'S glory is at its height! How does one know as much? What are the portents? Turn the meticulous calendar face to the wall—a courageous gesture for a soul to make—and one could be a month out in the reckoning. That would never do, for this workaday world of ours is obliged to go about most of its business with a time-table in one pocket or the other. Even its love-affairs are matters which have to be fitted in by appointment. I know it has to be done, but a repetition of love-making on a street corner at 6.30 must turn out to be a drab antidote to a city day's routine, dress it up with rouge and "hot" music as such lovers may.

There is no substitute for a summer evening that has a stile across its path. The time of the day is settled by the going-down of the sun, the time of the year by the leaves over one's head. The fair-weather winds from the east are shaking down the vernal leaves out of the elms. They fall in a whispering cluster over the heads of a clump of yokels—of whom I am one. A glance at the little heap of discarded young green at our feet and it is midsummer.

There's no doubting the fact; neither has it aught to do with a date. Nor is it a bit of untimely work on autumn's part. That small pile of early green, gentler, of more fragile shade than summer's green, is perhaps the last of our evidences that yet another spring has been, and gone again. The trees are at the height of their glory now.

The elm spires heavenward with a haughty dominance on the sky-line. The friendlier oak spreads out wide welcoming arms for rook or wren to take a rest in, deep

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shelter whether it be from sun or storm, noon or night. But midsummer is merciless as well. Winter's weaklings and the failures of spring are left, leprous and stricken, for the first pitying axe to make away with. In my part of England, not a few of the forest's best stand stripped of their vernal foliage by a pest, a stark, mean recompense for the roller-moth to have left in her trail for a nesting-place for eggs and the hatching-out of her avaricious grubs.

The cuckoo's note is gone. Who can say at what day and time? A few rude buffetings from wild winds on their way to the Orkneys, and another season of mischief for her came to an end. And it wasn't worth the cuckoo's while turning up again when it had passed over. Besides, who can be bothered to sing love-songs on a hot day! The babel of competitors had died down as well. Maybe they had something better to be getting on with, with families to feed, and with the ground almost as unyielding of succulent morsels as a road.

For ripening oats in a stony country the sparrows now declare their belief in an avian providence. But the man with the shot-gun driving them off is the very devil. Barley worship is a barren creed. Men may get drunk on it, but linnets have a greater respect for their mouths and feet than to get over the bearded defences of the barleycorn.

Across other fields, wheat is yellowing in the stalk. Poets who bring ripe corn into their rhymes will have something to write about this year. Already, an evening breeze and lengthening shadows of the hedgerow trees, so characteristic of the English countryside, ripple like the heave of a tide across a sea of changing green and deepen-

ing gold, and set even the rudest rustic's tongue wagging to a sort of music.

Wheat will be the toast of more than one pint-mug before the harvest is in. Night airs are fragrant with hay in the making. Stacks, rushed up to outwit a threatening cloudburst, throw out a tang with the morning dew. Men on their way to work can tell you that "It's no more'n might be expected." But, and they'll agree with you, a little heat in a stack won't do it, nor the cows next winter, a deal of harm. It might even improve it, provided there's not been much rain on it. The stables may have other views.

The picking of fruit has begun. Strawberries hold out long enough to bid fair yields to their raspberry rivals. Thrushes and blackbirds can hardly keep sober. White-currant wine is something no well-bred bird can leave alone once he's tasted it. One handsome chap forsakes wife and family, home and business, for a continuous flight across the garden "just to see" how the currant bushes are shaping. Many respectable folk have already gone to their beds when some of these fine fellows turn in. And if it's jam, well, even then you will find that a blackbird wakes up with a clearer head than most of us can at four o'clock of a morning. There must be a pretty good crop to meet the wishes of two lots of such country appetites. Fortunately there is, or I think there'd be no help for it but the gun, for Peter, the mildest of men, has that side to him when he is roused.

A gaudy jay (and I've bumped into her like in "town") has got the commonest tastes though. Broad beans in the pod seem hardly the fare to stay up half the night to pillage. But there's no accounting for tastes, and this

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flash young woman won't leave ours alone. The feud now raging between Peter and certain winged members of our community has reached a phase very like a touch of midsummer madness.

But men have other things to do than chase jays and blackbirds. It's not until the evening that most countrymen have the sort of odd moment to take a look over things. The clickety-clack of eight metal-shod feet turning tired and sweating into a neighbour's yard is that man's summer evensong. He looks at summer's glory through eyes that linger longest over the fruitful bits of his own handiwork.

Summer's glory ends in summer evening—a rare balsam.



YOU will remember what a day Sunday was? A blaze of summer's glory. I spent the very earliest hours of it crossing London on my way home from the Midlands. Empty, echoing streets with Saturday night's litter strewn all over the place. Policemen popped up round every corner and then stepped back into the shadows again. The taxis and milk lorries had the whole show to themselves. They went hell for leather down the smooth, straight streets, with a touch of leap-frog at the crossings. Occasionally one of the taxis would drop into a gutter-crawl with a hopeful eye in my direction. But I had time on my hands.

Railway time-tables have awkward gaps at that hour of the day, and the walk from St. Pancras to Victoria bridged it nicely. Besides, a sunrise across St. James's

Park is a sight to be seen even by a countryman. A morning haze about the towers of Westminster, and imagination puts a goblet to one's lips with wine in it as rich, I'm certain, as any that can be tasted on the banks of the castled Rhine. There's not enough of it, that's all. It's but a sip, a taste.

Covent Garden was taking its weekly day off. So evidently were the heavy road transport contractors. London must have been as nearly sound asleep as it ever gets. There was a far-off murmur that might have been the breathing of a fevered being fallen into a sleep at last. Every now and again one came across small gangs of restless youths flitting from street to street. They were good-humoured, sober, Cockney boys. What were they doing? A friendly policeman vouched for it that they were roaming about until the beds in overcrowded homes near by were vacant again. The hot night had something to do with it, but they were always to be seen no matter the time of year.

Then the first train of the day southwards filled up all the way down the line with the folk and the "families off for a long lucky day by the sea." Still, I thanked God it was to be green fields for me, and not the hot pebbles of the Brighton beaches. That sounds a bit unkind, but the sea has never been as real a friend of mine as the cool ripples and shadowy pools of the little stream that runs down to it.

There's so much more that goes on by the side of a stream. That flash of purple and green was no idle fancy. It was a kingfisher darting through the flickers of sunlight that the willow branches hanging near to the water had let through.

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And as the branches sway ever so gently in the wind, so the ripples throw back their kisses to the sun. That dark green bit of wood stationary under a ledge of the bank is a trout. Quite a small one, but, nevertheless, something to be proud about in such a Sussex stream. Water spiders stride the water like miniature trainees for a Channel crossing. That drone past one's ear was no aeroplane; only a bumble bee very pleased with the day and the day's findings. Dragon-flies flit and hover in and about the wild yellow iris or flag-flower growing right out of the stream itself. Close by is a bricked bridge that might be Roman; it carries the green lane over the water. Not a hundred people cross it in a year.

When the stream is a mere summer trickle, always fresh from springs that break out at the foot of the hills, the swallows dash under its solitary arch after the gnats and the midges. The bed of the stream is of winkle-stone. Great slabs of it that make sure footing for the children tucking scanty garments under their armpits as they carry out their web-footed explorations. I confess to being sentimental about that little arch. Two years ago when I caught sight of the River Zambesi that little arch came to me right out of the heavens. Instead of the steel girders that I saw spanning the great river, my mind set over it the red-brick bridge of the little Sussex stream, and preferred it. I shouldn't be surprised if in a month's time, when I see the Volga, the same sort of fantastic notion finds its way into my head.

Of the bits that are England to me, this bricked bridge with its scrolled parapets and little arch is one of them. Here and there along the stream's edge are the places where the cattle drink. If you are lying there when they

come, they will hesitate, sniffing the air until sure of you. But a drink this weather they must have. And so must the horses. As for poultry on free range, they get through an incredible amount. Ask the poor fellow who gets so tired at times carrying it round to them day after day in the warm weather. Perhaps the ducks have the best of it with a pond all to themselves. Lucky ducks! That's how I think when I have to be in London on a really hot day.



THERE'S one job above all others on the farm which to my mind puts a man on his mettle. Hoeing the root-crops, mangolds, swedes or turnips, with the sun beating down on your back, is not the simple thing it looks from a comfortable seat in a saloon car passing along the road.

"Singling" or spacing the plants the correct distance apart in the rows is a skilled performance that the machine cannot be trusted with, as yet, anyhow. Hoeing and haymaking clash rather badly as a rule, especially in a wet season. The scanty men are wanted usually in the two places at once. This year is a far better one. The sun and breeze which makes the best of the one, shrivels the weeds up at the other.

But to strike the blade on some heavy land in a dryish season from the day's beginning to the day's end is as trying to the wrists as if it were a road one was hoeing and not a field. I know what I'm talking about, and remember. There are men at work still in our fields who make a more skilful stroke with a hoe than ever they did with a pen. It's a good sight to watch a pair of old hands

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at this game, wielding their tools with all the celerity of a crack swordsman. Not a waste movement anywhere, each cut and thrust made with a sure eye, and a click as regular as a row of guardsmen putting heel to heel.

And like most master craftsmen, aware that they have the task well in hand, they can find time for a joke and a look round while the rest of us "scratch and peck" at the tangle of plant and pest a good dozen yards behind all the while. The novice finds such mastery exasperating. The hours and acres jeer at his weariness over the old men's rounded shoulders. Midday finds him tucked up under a shady hedge for a "bite" and a break, glad to get his feet off the ground for a while.

He'll not be the first to make a stir when the time's up. He'll rouse reluctantly from a couch that no drawing-room I've ever been in can better. I'd have some of those days poked up under the hedge for a coarse meal and a pull at the bottle over again if I could. They were some of the best.

Or when a storm broke over one's head to throw a sack over the shoulders and make a dash for it, sheltering with an indifference that was almost indolent.

One could afford to be indifferent about a crop that belonged to another man. A more ethical view of the damage done or the time lost was hardly to be expected. With tired enough limbs as it was, it would be easy not to care how long such a storm lasted. If it lasted till it was time to be getting off home, so much the better. A series of storms has been going the round of the farming counties this last week, a shade too spiteful for a lot of ripening corn, for we're within sight of the corn harvest. We passed one man's place on the chalky

side of a famous hill a week since who had a few acres of oats ready to cut. An astonishingly early first, their rustling nodding heads looked glorious in the morning sun.

A couple of hours later, as I noticed a boy floating a masted matchbox down the flooding gutters of Chichester, my amusement was cut short by a twinge of recollection. I didn't like to think that that ruddy patch on the hillside was being twisted and trampled down by the same downpour. But most likely it was, and that poor fellow has now a job in front of him that would try the best of us.

It seems to me we shall be hearing of quite a lot of corn "laid" by the storms recently, and of wheat especially. It's the penalty of heavy crops such as are grown in few other parts of the world. The straw weakens in most of our wheat strains as the grain-yield becomes heavier. That's an abiding task for the scientist. Plant breeders are now at work on it, to develop resistance in the straw to such a climate's buffetings without a diminution of quality in the grain. It's either improve or go under with Dame Nature. She takes no excuses.



THE countryman makes less of the idea of a holiday than the rest of us. "Holiday! I've taken no holiday for what must be close on twenty year now. Work's good enough for me." I wondered. Later the man's wife, pulling up the left corner of a coarse apron with which to wipe a pair of hands straight out of a greasy washing-up bowl, said they hadn't been able "to get away" ever since they were married.

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First came the children. Later there was never anybody who could be trusted to look after the stock. Besides, you could never tell just when the haying 'd get done. "Still, I suppose things might have gone better for us if we had managed to get away from things a bit now and then." There was something tired about the woman's voice. The man's comment was just a brusque "Hand us out the pig-bucket, Nell; time 'twas emptied." So the farming round goes on. At least for the small man, and even when the hay is in, the stack must be thatched. The pegs will be cut out of the wood and a few trusses of straw bought from the corn merchant, "and dear they be and all."

When you thatch a stack, it's the winter you're thinking about. The last week in July and a cloudy evening brings out the remark from someone or other coming in late for the meal, "the days be drawing in again." It's an apology for being late. But it's true enough all the same. As soon as the last full moon's back is turned, the lamps have to be trimmed and lit once more for supper and bed. For ourselves, we've had enough of lamps. The light they give may be homely, but they're dull. And trimming and cleaning a dozen lamps every day is no joke.

But it's to be electric light for us from the autumn. That's the promise we have from the contractor. "The grid" means that at least to us. No more messy lamps to clean or go wrong. One more household drudgery abolished. After the lamps we want the pump to go. Pumping may be a picturesque proceeding to the visitor, but it has its drawbacks, especially when the visitor turns on the taps like a townsman. Those tanks at the

top of the house take some filling, the sort of job one doesn't care to do twice a day. In any case it's a nuisance having to bother so about the water. As far as our part of the country is concerned, it's time enough that the muddle of little private water companies grabbing the springs of our parishes and profitably ladling them out a few miles away while we and our cattle go short, was put an end to.

Three such concerns draw their supplies away from three villages where the folk usually finish up the summer buying it by the bucketful. But a lot of the fault is with the villagers. They grumble hard at the time, but that's about as near as they are prepared to get to doing something about it. If somebody does try to work up an agitation about such a stupid predicament, then the other side has only to shout "Bolshevik" or other such nonsense, and he finds himself just a voice crying in the wilderness. The villagers get behind their doors and take a peep at the agitator from their lace-curtained windows of petty respectability.

A village can be a spiteful place. So much depends on a few people. The worst still get too much of their own way. The best mind their own affairs too much. Yet what better-hearted folk could you wish to meet than the same folk at work in their fields or among their stock? That man who passed you at the gate leading home a load of green-stuff, "green-meat" some call it, for the cows, gave you a cheery enough greeting as he passed. Try to talk to him about politics at his cottage gate when the day's work is done, and he'll be as shy as a schoolgirl. You can ask him how the cows are milking and he'll tell you in his way. He'll most likely bemoan

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the "falling off" in the grass. By falling off he means not so much the amount of grass still about as the quality of it. Once the hay is cut and July is about finished, the heavy milkers will need a supplementary feed to the grass.

Most of us turn to cattle cake, but the wisest, if they've the land, grow a catch-crop or two to last the summer out. For the countryman never forgets that the summer is all too soon over once the sun has changed his course. The peat-digger of the West is already at work getting ready for the colder days. But the rest of us—well, let's make the most of our holidays. A change of sky and we should all be the better for it, I think, in spite of the countryman's way of getting on "wi' me work."



SEVEN miles from a railway station turns Sunday morning into a more than usually sedate affair. Between me and the rest of the world is nearly a thousand feet of "Down," a barrier which has kept more than the sea in its place in its time. Three little fields of corn have been scratched out of the hummocky side of that steady rise from the shore. The rest is still what it has been for a century or two, rough grazing, with a few coverts for "the Shoot."

A thin strip of road girdles the foot of a ridge that is "look-out" for sixty miles of coast-line. A half-dozen villages use it for the traffic between each other, for, late in the day as it is, they still hesitate to take much of their business to the other side of the hill. Only about six

family names are relayed from place to place. They are written upon most of the farm-carts, over the lintels of the inns and shops, or scratched on the sides of the fisherman's few boats. One asks the policeman about the "goings-on" of the place. He trudges a strip of country that is new to him yet. The other man was here for a generation. He wouldn't have talked as critically of his neighbours as this man.

"See that bit of wheat. If Henry Staithes takes as long to get it cut and carted as he did a similar piece last harvest, it'll take him seven weeks. He and his family have had the land too long, and the rent's pre-war! I tell him so!"

"The Thomas Staithes who keeps the inn in the next parish is some sort of relation. Most all of 'em are related in some way or other—Bill Staithes, the fisherman, says he's no relation, but he must be if anyone cares to go far enough back to look for it." The one change times have brought to the face of the hill is a mansion, straddling a spur, and said to have cost £20,000. "Pity the money wasn't spent on the labourers' cottages. The man's not there more than half his time, if that! Who is he? That I can't say."

He knew the name, but that meant next to nothing. To ask who he was meant that you wanted to know all there was to know. "It's someone from up North, taken it for the shoot. But you never know he's about until you happen to see a light at night. Brings everything b' car, maids and all."

I've not heard a good word said by anyone yet for that mansion. And it must have been ten or fifteen years since it was "put up." That's the local phrase, not

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mine. And it means something "put up" since the War, certainly. Everywhere along that narrow strip of road is the same queer streak of resentment against it. Britain has more corners like this bit left in it, as hard to please, as slow to change, than would seem possible after the last twenty years most of us have been through.

I'd like to think otherwise sometimes. But then when one begins to poke about, get off the beaten track (and cars do tend to stick to beaten tracks!), there you come up against the men and women who haven't moved yet, and don't want to, what is more. They do the farming of the lands. They choose the topics of the inns. They rule the courts and councils over wider areas than some of us have taken into account. One can find out more of this state of mind standing in front of a door than asking the way sitting over the four wheels of a car. Sunday morning, a girl "hiker" (again a word as used by the folk I'm talking about with a tinge of contempt in it) knocked on a door, picturesquely. She wanted rooms. "Most likely they can put you up at 'The Rake's Progress'—try there." And the door was shut.

Not always is the pretty cottage lying back in the fields a friendly one. Some of the refusals to the overtures of the passer-by are meant to be as venomous as sharp tongues can make them. Some villagers take a peep at the stranger, not merely because they are shy, but because they suspect him. One prefers to think of all countryfolk as hospitably disposed, kindly, welcoming. Villagers vary surprisingly. Some are, some are not. On the other side of the hill they may be quite different.

A farming life builds up its own philosophy of affairs. Seventy years the servant of the same acres and it's no

wonder such a man shakes his head at a good many of the things they tell him nowadays. So, when I read that politicians and social reformers want another half-million families settled on the land, I only hope they'll bear the deepest reasons for its neglect in mind. Men leave the land for the towns as much to find fellowship as livelihood. To have lived there is to know what I mean.



“THEY’M all at work in the fields!”

Saturday evening, and on any ordinary sort of a day the barber’s saloon would have been lined with a queue of bristling chins, some dark, some merely downy, waiting a long, gossipy turn. But not so last week at Eborough. Saturday nights, and most village lads make for the market-towns’ market-place, with thoughts of Sunday’s likely dalliances ridding the high-stepping impulses of the adolescent self-esteem. A new tie, a smartening-up at the hairdresser’s, a stylish pair of “slacks,” “fags”—something or other by which to be the more distinguished on the following day.

At Eborough only a few of the country-women were in from those flat, fat acres of the Fens. They were hot like the rest of us, and shopping lapsed into an indifferent affair, a habit hard to break though, even when the men-folk had to be in the harvest-fields. But the early buses, I noticed, were well filled. Tired men would be coming in for tea, the only concession to leisure in the most outstanding of farming weeks for a generation. Done for the day and the week as well, up would go tired feet for a

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bit of a rest. 'Twouldn't do for the women to be out when the men came home.

Corn stubble can be more wearisome than the plough. Such a drag with it. The heavy boots get thrown off into the customary corner with a deeper sigh of relief than ordinary.

So it was that the market-stalls at Eborough and everywhere else like it in this country had so few folk round them on Saturday. Trade was quiet. "Not that we ever do do a lot on the Saturday afore the Bank Holiday. It's not to be expected. People have their minds on other things. But that's not what we are up against to-day. It is harvest come on us a fortnight sooner than most of us can remember. But what a rare harvesting!"

A week more of "fine" and it would be all over on some farms. Two weeks and most everybody will have done. They all had their eye on the harvest-fields, did those vendors of the market-place. They are reckoning that the farm-men will have some "harvest-money" to spend this time. "And they'll spend it and all!" I can hear the man's chuckle of expectation, see a pair of chubby, ringed fingers rubbing together in business-like anticipation.

Some of the fortunate ones, "always provided the weather keep as good," would have as much as £11 or £12 in their pockets for more or less a three weeks' harvest, for the luck looks like being with the men a little for once. Still, there have been harvests in plenty when the same money would have to be spread over the five or even six weeks. For the men on day work, a short harvest is not quite the same boon, though the day rates

go higher where both potatoes and corn have to be got in with the same "hands." The harvest money still finds its way to the market-place. The week "at the sea" for the farming man is a claim yet to be staked. It will come, though, and before long, maybe. But most of the extra still goes on the children. A man here and there may get a much-needed suit out of it. Even less the woman a new hat. Or both may steal a day off somewhere or other with a pride that needn't ask the boss for a halfpenny.

All this one can hear standing round in a market-place, or can pick up with "the change" at this stall or that. On Saturday things might have been quiet, but there was no gloom. Each stall-holder was so confident about the better business to come. Wise shopkeepers, stocked up for the farm-workers' expansive moods, looked over crammed window displays evidently pleased about their enterprise. Not much of it will be wasted. Old lamps will be changed for new in the Aladdin sense. One or two awkward corners will be rounded, a few bills paid.

But it has been a great week on the farms. Five poplars and a mill standing over a stream made a pleasant picture when its hot hours finished up on Saturday night. Horses turned out, rolled over and over, dead certain it was Sunday to-morrow. The staidier ones sauntered to a pool under the trees for a deep drink. Cows flicked the last tease of the day's flies off their backs. I saw a man put his fingers to a quaint latch with as rich a content as can ever steal over any of us. Five new stacks in his yard scarce ten days before were still standing as grain in the fields. He had given a last look round at the poplars, at the cool flicker of the stream, at his

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cows, at his horses, at his stacks and then up to a full moon.

It had been a great week on that man's farm. His men were off home down the lanes, their coats slung over their arms, thinking of "harvest money." As for the rest of us, we were all on holiday. It must have been many a day since the full moon looked down on such a pretty sight, I thought.



DOES farming pay? Like a game we used to play, "Some say 'Yes' and some say 'No.' " Anyhow, few seem able to be very clear on the issue, and for reasons plain enough. A good deal depends upon the farm itself, or the man running it. Soils vary from sand to stubborn clay throughout Britain, and that, too, makes a deal of difference. One man has a market right at his very door. Another may live only in Somerset, trying to make butter of his milk, and be no better off than the same sort of man doing the same sort of thing in far-away New Zealand. Bottling milk shows up both colour and cream-line. So the Guernsey cow comes into favour, putting other types out. Fashion turns the corner as unexpectedly in cattle breeds as it does in women's hats.

When it comes to horses, I doubt very much if a boom in the Suffolks is of much use to the breeders of Shires. A business man gets a scare about the City's future, or maybe indulges a whim and spends more on a model dairy than some local authorities spend on housing the people in twenty years. In seven such cases out of ten the time comes when he has had enough of such indul-

gences. He sells up and bleats about his losses. Shrewder men than he, at this game, anyway, attend the obsequies readily enough and wink their eyes at the auctioneer in the ring if the prices are "knock-out" enough. But the short answer is that the Socialist would be wrong in both his theory and purpose if every farmer more than paid his way.

Neither does labour play its part willingly or skilfully enough. And why should it? A machine is no aid to the discerning among them, as things are. These are issues not confined to farming alone. They only provide farming a common cause with the rest of industry. In the meanwhile, the quick-witted and the fortunate usually manage well enough. And if they happen to prefer the life, as most of us in it do, well—is there any better? There are those who urge that larger units of production will make our industry more prosperous. Personally, I feel that such possibilities should not be exaggerated. Some forms of farming, yes. Eggs and milk production, corn-growing, fattening of pigs and cattle, orchards, in fact most products for the market.

When it comes to breeding, the smaller unit does best. Of all the interests that a farmer has, that of keeping a watchful eye on the calf pens, the farrowing sows, the young and growing live-stock generally, is the one that appeals chiefly to me. Before you know where you are a new generation of four-footed friends is crowding out its housing quarters. The older ones must be weeded out. But, alas, they have grown up with you. As youngsters they fed from your hand or knew the rattle of your bucket twice a day. This one or that may have been ill at some time. It was your care and concern that coaxed

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it back to the feeding-trough again. Or a promising cow, tearing its udder badly on some barbed wire or broken stake, had been patiently handled for weeks at a stretch until the gash was healed.

I don't care how keen a man may be to make a commercial success of his farm, when it comes to getting rid of one or the other of the creatures who know the sound of his step or the touch of his hand, it's not an easy deal to make. A good home for the animal less a pound or two is preferred (more often than the peasant mind is given credit for) to the top price that could be extracted from a less particular quarter. And in this the man is as good as his master. Give the right fellow his head, let him feel his efforts are being backed with every reasonable kind of facility, and it isn't a wage award that determines his hours. No master is prouder of well-filled yards of thriving beasts than the usual run of the men who look after them.

The same is true of the crops. Farming is an industry that has an uncommon pride about it. Let the chances be fair and no body of men would be more ready to come down on the slacker than the members of an agricultural community. When the time comes for it, district panels of workers and farmers (for the former have perhaps higher standards in this matter) would deal far more drastically with deficiencies in farming practices than the most ardent of bureaucrats. There is a livelihood in farming, and a livelihood that has joy in it. Mere profit is really not the issue, though the system at present flies that tawdry standard over wide fields of our enterprise.



ON the farm this is the century's most extraordinary year, and from more than one aspect country-folk will be talking about this summer's sun for a generation to come. Cattle-graziers (one can still see the term written up over a village shop occasionally—"butcher and cattle-grazier") will look back on it as about their worst. Yet it will be just as long a while before the corn-growers stop singing its praises or finish with their boastings as to their share in its bounties. A surprising number, to one who travels about, will have grown "the best bit for miles round" this harvesting, when the time comes for such tales to be told.

So, wander along what lanes he may, the holiday-making stranger must expect to hear more than the usual contradictory accounts of the state of farming. But one hasn't to believe all one may be told, even though everything one hears will still be true enough in its way.

A stop at one gate, and here's a man's potatoes which are a failure. And what he has got aren't worth anything. So he tells you. And they look like it. "Never grew such a poor lot. No size to 'em." One can see as much, so it is not surprising to learn that the yield per acre of the plot is "nothing like it ought t' be." But he may as easily forget to mention—or he may not, for some of the grouzers are often honest enough about it—that he was "all behindhand gett'n 'em in." Such a cultivator trusted to rains coming which never did. Leastways, not sufficient to do much good. And what little there's been, since the "sets" were planted in May, "soon got away again." A wet summer would have suited him. The fact is that the man who was well ahead with his cultivations and sowings is the one now clapping his

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hands over bumper crops. The other sort can only add their lamentations to the growing complaints about drought.

Not a dozen miles down the same road, another face, beaming all over with pride, opens a generous mouth to acclaim that he "never know'd such a crop as this 'un on this bit afore. Every root is a bucketful." He proves it. "See here," and the fork goes in to the top of the tines, the haulm is taken by the scruff of the neck, and, "Did you ever see such a beautiful lot?" Digging potatoes is a pastime to men in that mind. He would like you to think that it all came about by his good farming. So would any of us standing in his shoes. All that's wrong in his case, and he tells you, is the price. But that doesn't rob him of his pride in the crop. With a bumper crop to back him up, a bad price loses half its terrors. Besides, the potato-grower knows it's only "second early" time as yet—a "cash" crop with most; the sort of crop one grows to meet a bill.

Unfortunately, too many men want that cash at much the same moment as the rest, and so they push their produce on to markets already fully supplied. Between them, they only manage to knock each other's prices about, for it isn't the foreigner this time in the case of potatoes. Or they land themselves into the hands of a bunch of shrewd middle-men, experts at an old game of playing one forced seller off against another till both are brought to the same desperate mind they each complain so bitterly about. "Giving the stuff away." A lot of farming troubles come along that road. But a year may make a deal of difference in some directions at any rate.

The "graziers" have much the same mixed-up story to

tell. Leicestershire says it is "losing £5 a head on every beast" fattened off on its wonderful pastures. And I don't doubt it in a good many cases. For one thing, grassing doesn't stand up to blue skies the same as wheat does. And for another, not a few men bought young cattle last winter and spring at prices reflecting an optimism that has not been realised. They have kept the beasts the best months of the year, and now are right glad to be rid of them at much the same money as they gave at first. The grievance they have is that they feel themselves to have been officially misled.

But that is only one year's story. The same men, "and a few more added to 'em," as a dealer I know puts it, are buying young cattle at prices now that are bound to come out right another year. "They're buying right. It won't worry them if fat stock prices do keep down for another month or two. They'll go up in time!" That is how some talk. It is so often that way with farming. Nothing ever does suit everybody in such an industry of so many diversities. The only trouble with some of the men who would like to buy young cattle—"stores" they call them—now that prices are right from their point of view, is "where to put 'em."

Meadows are getting brown. Ponds are drying out. The cows have to cover more acres before they feel full enough to lie down for the cudding. Two weeks ago the air was full of the glories of harvest. Two weeks from now and we shall be called upon to face the gathering woes of the dairy-man looking into his empty milk-churns. Even so, it won't do dairy farming much harm to ease up the milk supply for a couple of months. And, if that happens, Nature will have done something for the

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farmers that economics and common sense failed to get them to do. But we'll tell that story another time.

As it is, the men with the corn-lands look like not only getting in a twelvemonths' crop, but also ten weeks of the best chance in a lifetime to turn their land over and give it a fallowing. Summer's not done with till the end of October, when this country's in the mood for it. Weed-seed, shed in the cropping, takes root with the first top shower. That's any man's chance to make a clean start, and a good many will take it. Scarifiers and ploughs can do a rare job now with the crops safely in and the land lying fallow. Not a man should be idle. And so, by the time this year's done with, farming will have a deal more than a record harvest to talk over, one way and another.



MOSCOW.—I've been living in a pile of bricks and mortar for the last few days, and I just don't like it. Hotels even in Moscow, for that's where I am at the moment, are much like hotels in other places, in that one soon gets tired of them.

Anyhow, I'll soon be out of this one for a long trip South, trying to make contacts here, there and anywhere with the sort of people I feel I know best. Some of them will have baskets on their arms loaded with cucumbers and cabbages on their way to the towns to trade. Others will be moving northwards from one harvest centre to another. As we meet and pass, I shall be taken for a tourist and tolerated only on that account. Along the banks of both railway and river the scythes are still going.

The same type of herbage one sees by the wayside in England, though scantier, lies in neat rows drying in the hot sun. Four birch posts cut from the fringes of the endless forest, with a roof that adjusts the poles as the miniature stack of dried grass rises with to-day's pitching and the next day's shrinkage, house the precious fodder for a long winter to come.

Gangs of genuine gipsies, as gaily clad as courtiers, stride along dry, dusty tracks which fade into threads over the edge of distances that lead to Turkestan this way and to Poland that. They are on their own errands. They obey their own laws. Chocolate-brown, they walk in the wake of the sun. They tell me I shall see great herds of young cattle on the plains fathered from purchases off our English farms. Here and there a bearded priest passes with his arms folded and his hands tucked up the wide black sleeves of a fading garment. He ruminates on changes that must indeed be changes to him. He makes no greeting and gets none so far as I have seen yet. Fierce flashes of lightning, great crashes of thunder, clear up a sultry day. Rain teams down and I could hear the parched, porous soil sucking the welcome moisture down to its depths.

But the next day seemed as hot. I think often of my garden. Where are the flowers here that a passionate people ought to be growing? In the parks, where tired folk rest and young folk play, there may be plenty. But out in the country, who has time for flowers? A busy nation still dragging heavy feet over the debris of a past in ruins makes little attempt to be gracious to the stranger. He takes his chances with the rest. And that's not to complain, for why should they offer to do better

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when so many backs must be bent to the task? The bread they put before him is at least as good as that which they break off in their own hands.

There are fields of sunflowers, but they are for the poultry which is badly needed to fill out the larders. Some day they'll plant these glowing sun-daisies round their houses along with other kinds. Meantime they must go on filling up the interminable stretches of scaffolding everywhere. How long it will take them to do this, who can say? The patient ponies go on dragging timber and tiles, bricks and mortar to the sites of construction. Day after day the same ponies and more bricks and more timber.

But I'm, as I say, to see what the peasants are doing. Perhaps I shall find out where all the travellers are going. I have an idea, though, that if I followed them to the end of their pilgrimage I should come across them kneeling before some new task, bending to pick up a tool the like of which they had never used before. For whatever the faults here, the call is for every man to work. The day's work is both the citizen's choice and obligation. And the women are there to take their share, a rare comradeship.

But there are victims, or are they only fools? A man with his head on the kerbstone and his legs in the way of the traffic is as dead drunk with liquor as a man can be. The children jump over him, round him. But he doesn't belong to them. They scarce look down at him. They go on along the road, whichever happens to be their best way. And so do the rest of the people. They either understand or they won't be bothered with him. I'm not sure which it is. The streets are noisy, the chatter

incessant but restrained. I'm on my way now to see if the peasants, the folk I know best, take things much the same way.



SOMEWHERE in Russia.—Away from England, one is hungry for news of it. What is the weather like? How are they getting on with the harvest? The hay must all be in, and yet one thinks of last year, when there were men still at it in the first week of October. I've got to the stage now when, even if I needn't, I'd be bound to come back home to see for myself. Not many days now and one will be pacing the decks of a ship in the North Sea, keeping a sharp look-out for a first glimpse of the shores of "Old England." And I'll warrant there will be a few others beside myself doing much the same thing.

Somewhere low down in the haze of a sunset maybe one or other of us will make out a coast-line that we know to be "Old England" and summon the rest of us to look on it. And somehow England feels old. It's the young in Russia that is uppermost. There the old is passing away; ruthlessly, perhaps. But as England rises up out of the sea the imagination will flick from hamlet to village and village to town, lingering over the beauty, the quality, the character of each. Here are resources, richer, ampler than any left behind me. Of that one is certain. But who, party or man, will have the courage to rouse us from a deadly uncertainty? For time passes. Climates, imperceptibly changing, have determined the fate of more than one civilisation in the past. It begins to look as if new ideas can undo all the fastenings with

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which an Empire guards its centuries. The best of wine undrunk turns to little better than vinegar once the cork is drawn. Lying about us, under our hands and very noses, is all the stuff others are using to build up their new age. We've mastered a good deal of what they still grapple with. They're only at the beginning of the machine age, clambering over oily masses of metal, wiping their sweating bodies with greasy rags, struggling to command a technique that our own workers laid hold of half a century since.

When I run over England in my mind, I feel it's time enough we got to the music part of our industrial displays. We know most of what there is to be known about the production of useful things. A man has to be a pretty bad lot to be denied bread. The stupid thing is, nobody really wants to go as far as that. There is no need for it, or for much else of the same kind that we tolerate.

For an hour recently I tried to explain to the director of a socialised milk trust how it was that, in a country producing more milk than at times it knew what to do with, its people, many of them, scarcely tasted it from one year's end to the other. He could only shrug his shoulders. I'm afraid it all sounded too crazy a state of affairs to be believed. He could have done with ten times as much as he was handling. Yet in some respects I felt we were nearer to the goal, in this connection at any rate, than he was.

Even while talking to him I carried in my pocket the first report of a farming venture initiated just before leaving home. The herd, got together in a hurry, were doing fine. "Whiskey" was this; "Sally" was that; all

the way down the stalls names had been invented for the lot. Markings and oddities, temper and traits would tell me plain enough who was who. But most encouraging of all, the milk they were producing, tested under commercial conditions, was well above standard. Supplying a large co-operative concern, commendably paying on qualitative results, we were already well up in the list. A bonus from the first payment would be something to live up to. Such pride has little or nothing to do with business. It is part of a spirit that remains to be harnessed to this and every branch of farming productiveness conceived in terms of a vital national service.

Production for use and not for profit can devise competitive goods as effective in promoting social sufficiency as any that individualism run riot uses to belabour the backs of weakening neighbours. As things are, we waste far too much of our energy and our resource shouting down the other fellow. We want a fair deal, and so we set about getting it by trying to drive the other fellow out of market, ending usually in only giving both of us a hell of a time. Meanwhile, the crowd stands by with half-empty hands. Signs are not wanting that we can promote business efficiency on better lines than these. The human spirit sets higher standards than we give each other credit for. It delights in the good thing. Education has bigger tasks before it than to make us sure of our three Rs. I fancy also that industry is within sight of ending our "bread-and-butter" worries. The thought of seeing "Old England" again coming up over the skyline to greet us sets such notions furiously in motion within me.



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THE quack medicine man has been doing a roaring trade in the world's market-places lately. It is his business to produce a pill for every ill. He rattles his tongue over the symptoms of an age all too conscious of its aches and pains, and it is only a matter of minutes, as time goes, before even the healthiest sections of the audience begin to feel they ought to try some. Labels count for a lot. Quite ordinary complaints become simply terrifying written out in the illegibilities of the consulting-room.

I spent the best part of the last week listening to one of these spell-binders. As a matter of fact, there were two of them "in it." One did most of the talking while the other mixed with the crowd and kept passing the bottle round. The crowd was typical of most crowds got together in a market-place. It wasn't a very difficult matter to judge the kind of homes most of them came from. A change of diet and a new suit would have met the elementary needs of them and their dependents to a degree that might prove astonishing. I couldn't help wishing that there could have been some woman in the crowd, with a shopping basket on her arm, bold enough to get up and say as much.

What was wrong with the world in this man's estimation was "too much wheat." The cure, shaken up at least once a year in most countries, was to "cut acreage." Altogether it was a rather solemn affair, a bit mystifying at times, with nobody quite certain what it all meant.

On the other side of the same market-place another bunch of folk in from the country were being assured that what they were all suffering from was a queer complaint called "glut," and that the only cure for that sort

of complaint, in our climate, was "quantitative control of imports." This stuff had to be taken frequently on most days of the year, according to the marks on the bottle. Altogether it sounded a somewhat complicated prescription, but the young fellow on the soap-box was very eloquent, and there were one or two people present prepared to testify that it had done them a lot of good, and they wouldn't be without it now for all the money in the world, and that sort of thing.

Well, hop-picking gets under way this week, and one or two of the men who took quite strong doses out of the bottle labelled "cut acreage" when they were feeling a bit seedy a while back wish now they hadn't taken quite so much of it. Everybody wants hops now. A few years ago they couldn't give them away. To-day, a splendid crop isn't half big enough. It will be that way with wheat and meat presently, if we believe all we're told from certain quarters of authority at the moment. There are some considerations so elementary about food and drink that even economists, and certainly statesmen, ought to keep them always well in front of their minds when dealing with them.

For one thing, we all need food and drink to live by, and we are therefore entitled to them. And no one person more than another, whatever the state of their purse happens to be, needs food or drink either more or less. The time cannot be far distant when the categories of foodstuffs necessary for the reasonable well-being of the least of us will be scheduled, to be claimed as a human right by all of us. Bread and milk will be among the first items on that list.

To talk wildly about taking drastic steps deliberately

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to shorten the supplies of either of these commodities, when a hundred witnesses can be brought forward at any tribunal to testify to their scarcity for every one ready to urge restriction because of "glut," is, viewed from a proper angle, to be talking utter nonsense.

Under the very windows of the Conference room where a hundred delegates were burning candles into the early hours of the morning devising complicated schemes to cut down wheat acreage, were huddled a hundred wretched men entitled by every proper right of man to countermand what was taking place over their heads. No more appropriate spot could have been chosen for a midnight wrangle over bread than Pall Mall, for that's where Canada House stands, the meeting-place of the world's wheat conference. That was my thought as I turned my back on it. The feverish murmur of Piccadilly Circus was one side of me. The mutterings of half-hungry folk shuffling down for the night on the seats round Trafalgar Square was on the other. In my hand was a document setting out the aims of prosperity in the language of scarcity.

Things will never work out right that way. We shall have to think again before we get very far along that road. As a gardening man with a country garden that grows most things, there is one condition of affairs that never really bothers me, and that is having too much of anything. The thing that really matters, to one who prefers fresh vegetables, is not having enough. Plenty you either give away or let the pigs have. But to have to buy potatoes, cheap as they may be, goes against the grain. And not because it means money spent that might not have been, but rather on account of a queer strain of

self-respect that runs through most of us, especially countrymen.

Plenty should no longer be the world's embarrassment. There's something wrong about a settlement that stops the growing of food in a world very hungry yet.



EARTH and sky are a bit out of step. Clouds may come and go, cooling the ardours of the sun for a day or two, but neither oaks nor housemartins seem to have much confidence in things. All too soon the oaks begin to look old. As the wind blows, it rustles over their limbs, making a most sinister sound. Too many leaves are seared for my liking. Such parched lips breathe in and out as though it hurt a little. The boughs draw back from even the west wind as if shrinking from it.

One feels that good rains now wouldn't help the big trees much. Their deep roots, like a well's, depend for their sustenance on underground reservoirs that should have been replenished months since. To-day's dry leaves hanging so wearily over the edge of my pond are nothing more or less than a reproach to the failures of February. And the martin which flits in and out of the cool shadows they cast is inclined to pay more heed to such harsh premonitions than the butterfly tempted out by a hot sun to seek belated blossomings.

I see a young apple tree has bloomed again. Bees and butterflies are glad of it, for even the blackberry bushes are well-nigh a month ahead of their proper time. They make a fine show. A few showers, and a cornucopian

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season will finish up with a flourish. Stained little pinafores and fingers will find many a bowlful of excuses hanging over the sides of our lanes. And who knows a better one than apple and blackberry when both fruits are at perfection and gathered not twenty yards from one's own doorstep?

But what is one to do with surplus marrows, runner beans and sweet peas? The thrifty housewife, with a hundred and one other things to think about, wishes everything just wouldn't happen all at once. Plums take a lot of jars. The marrows will have to wait a while. "Put them in there on the pantry shelves in the cool. They'll get riper yet." The beans are salted down in crocks. A lengthening row of blushing tomatoes on the windowsill are a glowing testimony to one's best efforts in the garden, a feat not so often accomplished as might be thought, well south as we may be. In the fields ragwort shows up every inch as ragged as its name. Here and there, diminutive lady's-fingers and clovers essay a second attempt at flowering, not forgetting that the mowing-knife cut their first down. The grass wouldn't be above giving a fresh bite if a good rain came, but somehow one doesn't expect it even if clouds do show up at times. This is the sun's summer, as the old men knew it would be before it started.

All the same, matters are getting awkward for some folk. You don't keep a well going with a few showers. And when one meets a moorhen in full daylight shuffling along a footpath, it's not a difficult matter to decide what it can be that is bothering her so. Moorhens wear a worried look at the best of times. They get doubly anxious as the ponds dry out. The poultry are

well into their moulting. Most men like to see them get it over in a month. Eggs can put the poultry-keeper on his feet if only he can persuade the hens to return to their proper business in October.

As for geese, nothing much seems to trouble them, or they would view with suspicion the daintier feeding thrust under their beaks as Michaelmas draws nearer. Roadside wastes and common-lands have suited them well enough up to the present—a hedge-bottom for noon shade and an old shed at night. But now that one or two neighbours who “like” geese—and that usually means that they can succeed with them where many another fails—are beginning to show a trifle more concern about the flocks’ meanderings, I draw my own conclusions. Not a few smallholders make a regular habit of turning geese into rent, and even men in a larger way find the money handy earned that way.

The small birds have given over any sort of singing. But for the wind, the air would be very still. At the edges of tiny brooks and streams a few gather and exchange “chirrup” and “cheeps.” They still find plenty to do with themselves. The young ones have not yet learnt all the older birds’ tricks on the wing. But the philosophic robin looks on from the swinging-branch of the oak. From his perch he can see the ploughs turning the grey stubbles in. Acre after acre of dark brown earth once again lies face upward to the sky. Small heaps of farmyard dung dot about the aftermaths.

Soon, however long the sun may keep its place, men in their work will have put another summer and its crops out of their minds for yet another year. The labourer will turn again to the hedges and ditches to “give ’em a

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brushing." Couch fires will belch grey columns of smoke along the track of the wind. Cow-houses will be colour-washed or limed ready for the cattle. The excitements of harvesting and fruit-gathering will have died down. The day's round will be settled at the stable door after both man and master have seen "what the morning's like." The daily toil and the common lot of the countryman will have been taken up again. Life will go on much as before.



WHEN the men start up the football season and the children go blackberrying—we may as well make up our minds to it—the summer is gone. That's not to say that the best of the year is over. Some of the year's loveliest days have yet to come. But the sun lies abed late. Nothing but his laziness lets the morning mists hang about so long, and by the time he gets after them, the mischief is done. The best of the apples will hang on the trees right up to November, but quite a few have already fallen. Still, the wasps, and there are plenty of these, and the worm are mostly responsible as yet.

Not all the corn is cut, though it ought to be, and nobody knows that better, I expect, than the man who has such an unfortunate crop. The rooks have it all their own way. One can tell exactly what they are up to as they strut over the debris of more than one fine crop laid to waste by what might well pass for sheer wantonness. An hour's storm, a whim of a storm that for no apparent reason played fast and loose with this man's oats or wheat, left another man's barley entirely alone..

The wise ones shake their heads. One can grow too good a crop. Heavy in the ear and long in the straw, and before you know where you are with it the wind and the rain have beaten it down within reach of the greedy bindweed. It never gets up again, and make your machinery as modern as you like, matters become only worse to set it on to such tasks. Scythes and swop-hooks, and everybody willing to lend a hand to "tie up," have to be brought out again. "We shall always be wanted." Some of the older men would like to think so as they rub up their blades, but of that I am not so certain, though as likely as not it will not be the inventor who takes up their challenge.

It will be the plant-breeder, the scientist selecting his strains for constitution wedded to high yields. A necessarily slow process, for even with the research worker harvest comes but once a year. Each stage in the building-up of the improved type has to go the round of the seasons, and even then may prove little or nothing. But Father Time goes about his business as leisurely as ever he did, in spite of what the bulk of we Westerners fondly imagine. He won't be hustled; neither does he take short cuts. At least, that's my belief. That's not to say he doesn't force his way sometimes to a revolution or a war. Our unreason probably compels him to such a course.

One cannot work steadily alongside Nature's processes year in and year out without gaining an ever-increasing respect for the way in which Time works things out. I have travelled farther, but I'm not in the least sure that the old oak still standing in its place where I left it when setting off on yet another journey hasn't

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sounder views about what is going on in the world. Loaded again with acorns ready to drop, its leaves are already seared. The old tree is obviously preparing for the inevitable. He has made a magnificent show of it this summer. Record heat-waves were tempered to pleasant tea-party standards under the wide spread of his branches shadowed as well in the pond under them. So they tell me.

The children have trusted him with their secrets; and so have I. But as I stood against the broad trunk on the evening of my home-coming after several weeks away, looking out in the twilight towards the hills to note the changes, he was the first to speak. A falling leaf from above touched me lightly, intimately, on the shoulder. Involuntarily, one looked up into the face of the old tree, and on it was written all there was to know. I have heard nothing since but what that old tree had already prepared me for.

And when I turned into the house, it wouldn't have been unpleasant to find the wide hearth afire with logs. Autumn often rewards her lovers with a cool kiss at parting. In fact, follow her the day through and you'll find she employs every art of the true wooer. And who can be better at that than a woman?—for I don't doubt that autumn is a woman ethereal. Spring is the child of the seasons. Even the old oak will be as young again as any of the rest of the trees then.

As it was, I found them trimming the lamps for the evening. That time of year has come for us. And, as one might have expected, they are all behind with their promises of electric light. Let's hope they'll keep to their word that we'll get it before the winter is really on us.

AUTUMN

Already the russet leaves are countless that float upon the pond, and in her saucy moods, a whack on the head from an acorn or apple tipped from off its pleasant perch by a rippling wench skipping prettily from twig to twig, provides the substantial indication that Autumn, at any rate among the seasons, is punctual.

Summer might seem not really gone, were it not for the lamplight and the fireside and the misty nip of the mornings.

With autumn there's no nonsense. She just gets on with her appointed task. The way she pulls the night-sky over the face of the sun makes one feel like a reluctant child summoned from the day's play for supper and bed.

How the days shorten !

WHEN September's first morning peeped through the window, one saw over her shoulder misty intimations that Autumn had indeed changed guard with bedraggled Summer overnight. The year's last watch has come in to take charge of a countryside that is littered everywhere with Summer's unfinished jobs. But Autumn can be relied upon to deal brusquely with these. It's no part of her business to be getting meadow hay in, and she'll take little pity on the grass that's not yet cut and is standing about in disconsolate heaps. Blackberries are more in her line, the gathering of fruit and ripened crops.

To her way of thinking, weeds in the garden or the fields should have been dealt with long enough ago, and, at any rate, it's not her fault if they've not. All the same, there they are, chickweed and groundsel, ragwort and coltsfoot, thistle and dock—flourishing because neither man nor summer had the heart to bother with them at the time. Who but the best amongst us cares to tackle weeds when he knows his grass or wheat is hardly worth the cutting? "A man had better by half lie abed than spend his money for nothing!" I've watched a certain good man's chin setting closer and closer to a broad chest during recent months. His eyes, dull with perpetual tiredness, and his rounding back are preparing us, as no complaints could, for his acknowledgment of defeat. He'll go under, sure enough, and all one can do is to be sorry for him.

They've harassed him for rent, they've harassed him for tithe, for mortgages, for overdraft and unpaid bills. Little did they help him, with the real toil of it all, but left him to make his own prices, even whilst he worked amongst his crops and cows. A "dirty-boot" farmer,

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he's his own labour, landlord and salesman. The times have to be good indeed for the average amongst us to manage all this.

And yet, talking of blackberries, the world of difference that there is between the quality of the sweating heap on a coster's barrow and the glistening ripeness of the fresh-plucked fruit in our wood near by is the world of difference that counts, if there's a choice in it, for some of us.

The children construct their caves and castles in sweet-smelling hay. They mix their wild pets with the tame and find, in secret places in the hedge, thrills that no gutter can provide. In the barn Peggy has her kittens, whose mother suckles a baby squirrel brought in from one of what are known as "the adventure" walks. The kind of walk the more precocious child of eight or nine decides to take all on its own; it may or may not lead to mischief, but, in any case, it is undertaken in the best traditions of the adventurous.

Six-year-old's recent birthday was celebrated by the purchase of Peter and Paul, two piglings of the snub-nosed variety, who had the good fortune to take her fancy, on the special day. And they were cheap enough. Their inspection is part of a daily itinerary which also includes a visit of inquiry as to the present behaviour of a certain gluttonous Houdan cockerel, "Tuftie," feathered and dandified to a most distinguished degree.

And to step aside from the disappointments of the farmed fields, taking an evening stroll along the ridge's path, is to find an assurance creeping into things. An uneasy hour with the newspapers can be so easily offset by a saunter round the pond, with its first sight of the old

oak adorned again with a thousand milky acorns, seated firmly as yet in their green and ornamented cups. What a finish Nature employs to decorate the plainest of her customary displays!

A robin without his red breast would still be a robin, but set as he is upon the smooth black limbs of a damson tree, and even the artist would miss something on his canvas, so exquisite in its natural effect that it stirs you beyond the ordinary, as this creature perches and trills his wintry song-snatches for your benefit.

But a wild, wet day now, with only the robin's wee song to be heard in the branches, prompts the countryman's question, "Let's see, when is it we have to be putting the clocks back?" Not yet, anyway.



ONE has to record the fact. Our swallows are gone. A twittering, excited party of friends called for them one morning, and by the evening ours had packed up their few belongings, taken a last look round the chimney-tops, and joined up with the rest for the next stage of what must be a thrilling adventure. I've no doubt they paid a few calls before they all finally left our shores—some old stables, or a barn or the belfry of an ancient church.

"So this is where you live! I'd no idea one could fit out a drain-pipe as cosily as this. But what do you do when it rains? Not used! Well, we might look out for a drain-pipe another year, Alfred!"

As I watched the callers flitting in and out the snug corner our swallow family had chosen, chattering, hust-

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ling, inquisitive, it struck me as a very human business. Two or three matrons were in charge. The youngsters were worked up to a high pitch of excitement. This was the morning everyone had talked about for weeks for "going away." "And what a fine day we've chosen!" If ever young swallows really "kick up" their heels, these did last Thursday. They were off somewhere or other, and knew it. Call the place Brighton or the Balearic Islands or the Soudan, no matter—they were off and were delighted at the thought of going.

It struck me they were going unnecessarily early. But, perhaps, they were a bit disappointed with September. The first two weeks, certainly. But when the fine spell continued, I wondered if they hadn't misjudged the situation. For since they went, with one last halt and look back from the telegraph wires along the railway, we've had some of the best days of the year. A sun hot enough to draw the damp out of every sheaf so that the harvest in these parts, anyway, can be said to be all in at last. Only a few acres of beans are still out, and they're easy enough to get.

One neighbour seized the chance that almost a week of fine weather gave him, to cut and make hay of a field of grass that he must have washed his hands of long ago. And now he's managed to make some of his best hay out of it. It's certainly his biggest crop.

Farming's a queer business. You make a mistake often enough if you throw your hand in too soon. Not unlike the swallow. A spell of bad weather, and you jump to desperate conclusions, only to find that a summer which seemed played out has a lot more kick in it than you had allowed for. That's the perennial dilemma. Some would

"ha' put more land to wheat last back-end if they'd bin a little more sart'n about this 'ere quota business." Lots more men, like the man I met at Findon Fair, "wish t' God" he'd let sheep alone at the sales last year. "I'd have bin a deal better off if only I had." And yet "the price of wool's improving, and sheep can't stay where they are for long."

The cheap-jack, who fascinated me with his jabber—I was careful to keep well on the fringe of the crowd or I'm convinced his tongue would have let me in for a tea-set that would have been condemned on sight by a cooler judge of domestic values—was telling the same sort of story to a ring of listeners kept in a continual state of half-persuasion. "Ladies and gentlemen, you and me'll never see such prices again. It's give-away value; that's all it is. Just give-away."

I looked round the circle of faces. Most of them were inclined to take the man's words seriously. Only a few could afford to smile at his shabby earnestness. The rest, mostly women, had a good mind to venture on an extravagance which was no part of their shopping intentions when they left home that morning. One could see what was going on in their minds, most of them, at any rate. Rose-patterned soup tureens, shapely vases, patterned cake-plates. Even if one couldn't use them, they'd look well on a sideboard.

Yet as soon as this perspiring salesman, and mind you, he worked for his living that day, held up a few ordinary cups, saucers or plates, he got rid of them. The women would have bought the others if they could—but nearly every one of them held a slender purse the more tightly under her arm, the more she liked the look of the "set of

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three" in the man's hand. There's only one thing holds up trade these days, and it sounds simple enough to say it—the women haven't money enough to spend. And I'm not thinking of "the West End" shops. The women I was standing amongst, most of them, would have counted themselves well enough off with £2 in their purses every Friday or Saturday throughout the year, as the case might be. But cheap as a salad-bowl might be, and as nice as it might look on the table "for Jim to come home to," the money wouldn't run to it.

With things managed otherwise, I'd little doubt in my mind but that that particular cheap-jack, in one of the smallest of market-places in England, would have sold out that day.



MOST folk are marking time on the countryside at the moment. So it seems to me. Maybe 'tis due to an early Autumn, with her pervasive intimations that it is time now to be putting one set of tools away and to get the others out, if only to be looking them over.

Already the russet leaves are countless that float upon the pond, and in her saucy moods, a whack on the head from an acorn or apple tipped from off its pleasant perch by a rippling wench skipping prettily from twig to twig, provides the substantial indication that Autumn, at any rate among the seasons, is punctual.

Winters are "not like they used to be." We can be kept waiting for Spring, only to find that she has slipped past and is laughing at us for our concern on her

account from behind Summer's already lengthening skirts. And as for Summer, alas! she can behave so often like the last. We'd like to believe that Summer was not really gone, were it not for the lamplight and the fire-side and the misty nip of the mornings.

But with Autumn there's no nonsense. She just gets on with her appointed task. The way she pulls the night-sky over the face of the sun makes one feel like a reluctant child summoned from the day's play for supper and bed.



AUTUMN time is the farmer's new year. He must begin to think about things, as we say, for another round of seasons. His job, at any time, involves long-term planning. But in the last year or two there has been a tendency, natural enough in the circumstances, to live more on a "day-to-day" basis. Short of money, he has sold cattle and pigs, sometimes whether they were fit to market or not, just to get hold of a bit of ready cash.

The small lines of farming, such as rabbits and poultry, including geese, have come in for a good deal more attention for much the same reason. The periodic arrival of the fortnightly milk cheque, or monthly one, as the case may be, has also become quite an event to look forward to. It has a nasty knack of shrinking about this time of year, though, especially for men who trust in a mere bit of grass to keep up the milk yields.

Lately I attended one of the leading cattle-markets of the country, one that handles at least 300 fat bullocks every week, and was solemnly informed by a farmer friend

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who had ten fine black bullocks entered, that prices were better because a certain elderly gentleman with a rubicund countenance overshadowed by a bowler hat was there to bid. The previous week, this highly-respected and much-sought-after buyer had felt obliged to attend the funeral of a friend. As the average price of the bullocks sold that day went down by about 2s. a cwt., taking 10 cwt. as the average weight of each beast, farmers in that part of the country went home feeling that they had had an exceptionally bad day of it.

One needs a real sense of humour to appreciate the fact that every one of them wended a weary way convinced that the funeral had everything to do with the melancholy story they had to tell their yardmen when they got back on to the farm again. I met a man in the lane, and we fell to talking about pigs. I knew he kept them, so it was the topic one was bound to say something about. He had the usual tale of woe. One gets so used to hearing it, though it never fails to rouse an anger, ever smouldering somewhere within me, into a splash of flame when the story is told, as it is, again and again. This man had sold some "strongish stores," pigs at least twelve weeks old, for 19s. apiece, only to see pigs no better sell the week later for 28s. each. Ten pigs at 9s. less each make a big hole in a £5 note. Farmers, especially the younger ones, begin to realise they must set about getting a shade closer to the real price for their products than that.

It may seem a great life for a man to be able to take a gun round the hedges of an evening, with a self-trained dog at one's heels, with faint country smells after rain or farmyard sounds in the dimming distance, filling out his

being with an enviable peace about the world's wider distractions. And so it is often enough, even for the man with cares nearer home to harass him.

But the drain on a man's vitality of this everlasting preoccupation with the irrational, nonsensical behaviour of "markets," is a strain that tells. Few men are cut out to master its cunning technique, and they are not always the best of us. Some openly boast they get a good living because most men are fools at the game. There are, fortunately, a lot more good farmers about than salesmen, though most farming men have preferred to think otherwise, up till now. It is an issue they had better make up their minds about pretty soon.



OF all his creditors pressing him hard just now, the working farmer, small or large, hates and detests the tithe-collector most. Not a man pays willingly. Were it not for their mortgages, the bulk of them would default without a scruple on their consciences. The mortgagee has become the trustee in effect for "Queen Anne's Bounty." His rights in a man's title-deeds must not be jeopardised by either sulky or obstinate refusals to meet the ecclesiastical demand. So in the end most of the farming folk pay up these antiquated dues. But now and again a free man exists willing enough to challenge claims for pay for parish duties that are never now performed. The tithe originally was offered that the Church might discharge her good offices to the sick, the poor, the naked and the ignorant. To-day these duties rest upon the State, and are discharged by a more

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mundane exaction known as "rates and taxes." That's how many a man sees the matter.

Now and again, as recently, a man too poor to pay a burden that he admits is legal enough has all his worldly goods "distressed" that these more spiritual obligations may be met. Country folk are nothing if not neighbours, and when this hateful tribute takes a poor man by the neck to turn him off his place, if only to keep alive its obsolete demands, then an old-time yeoman spirit is aroused. Hard times spur the resistance to this thing. The chance to strike at it is welcomed, and every time such blows are struck the Church sinks lower in the rural estimation.

Her Tithe Act of 1925 may yet prove a hard bargain so far as her more proper business is concerned. And in other directions the present farming mood is militant, mixed with a little optimistic uncertainty creeping into affairs because of the turn that more national events have taken of late.

The milk price settlement was a bad one in their eyes, and a long-brooding distrust of London's leadership has seized this pretext to wave the banners of disloyalty. County branches of the Farmers' Union are proclaiming their independence. One would feel more hopeful of such a display of determination and high spirit if it were generous enough to cover the needs of the men in the industry as well as their masters'. But of that I'm by no means certain, and in any case events look like taking the situation in hand themselves.

Autumn sowings were in doubt until a week ago. Stubbles were to be left until we were more sure of the future, so that not even the ploughs had been put in to

make a start. He would be both a foolish and blame-worthy man who still holds to such a mind. The best citizen is the man who saw his plain duty a month ago and got on with the season's work in the usual way. He will be sowing his wheat and oats early next month, in the reasonable expectation of a heavier yield when another harvest comes along than a November "seed-ing" will give.

The market-places are abuzz with the views and opinions of farming folk seeking counsel among themselves as to the likely effect of a fallen pound upon their fortunes. Fortunately, the idea is sinking into their minds that the grower of food stands the best chance of getting a fair deal at last from the hands of the townsman anxious to keep down his prices. But, with all the facts staring him in the face, he has been strangely slow in believing them. Many a man will decline to move more confidently until the merchant puts up his charges, and the dealer holds out on the price of a cow.

And between market-days the blacksmith's shop becomes the local rendezvous, when the small farmer lets it be known what he thinks about the situation to all and sundry gathered round. A damp day and more than one horse-man reckons that "Jinny" or "Boxer," as the case may be, "would be better off with a pair of shoes on her fore-feet or she'll be goin' lame." The blacksmith is a friendly sort, and is the craftsman of the village, handy for most jobs, from sharpening the boys' pen-knives to repairing electric lighting breakdowns. He has an idea that things are on the mend so far as farming goes, and maybe he's right. We'll see presently.



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“GROUND frost at night.” That is the frequent forecast of the weather experts now. And the cows begin to huddle under the hedges at night and the green blades they bite lose their flavour a little. Nevertheless, October opens amidst a scenic display of green and gold such as no other land can match. Nor have we bettered it in recent years. A friend of mine, just home from an arid region where one can count the rainy days in a year on the fingers of both hands, gets down on his knees and buries his face in the green grass. It brings more than refreshment to him. He falls to the ground out of sheer ecstasy. “Such green,” he bumbles. “God, what a green!” And he throws out his arms as though to embrace the twenty miles of it under his eye. He left the village a good many years ago with a lot of the folk shaking their heads after him. “A rough diamond if ever there was one turned out of this parish.” I can hear Sam Weavern saying so, and bringing an empty pint-mug with a bang to the table-top as he said it. And when Sam heard where my friend was off to, “the sort o’ place to suit him, I should imagine,” he said.

Now he is back again, and more of a gentleman to look at than most of those who’ve grown older at the same jobs while he’s been away. But his tongue has pretty rough edges to it still. Yet he makes me wonder how much that really matters, after a country walk or two with him. “Damn it, man, what’s the hurry? Let’s lean over this bridge for a bit. Do they ever catch any trout in here nowadays? Many’s the lark I’ve had in this cock-eyed stream.” He clutches my arm and puts his fingers across his lips. He drops on his knees and rounds his shoulders just like the poacher he once was, listening

to the slight crackle of twigs in the undergrowth. But his eyes now are on the further branch of the cherry tree overhanging the path slightly ahead of us. "What sort of a bird d'you call that?" He was quite excited. The words had hardly squeezed past his lips before she was off with a note as much like a saucy laugh as mattered.

He answered his own question. "By gosh. A yaffle-bird!" He was back amongst his boyhood memories for the rest of the walk. The green woodpecker had always been the yaffle-bird to him. "She'd always let you know when there was rain about."

"And were there as many partridges on the railway banks as there used to be?" A covey of eight had risen from almost under our feet.

My friend has to go back soon. "To think I've got to leave all this behind for that hell-of-a-hole out there." I happen to know this particular "hell-of-a-hole." I've been there. So I smile whenever I pass a certain huge poster on Clapham Junction station recommending you and me to spend our "winter in the sunshine." Most of us can't manage to do so, anyhow, though if we could I feel we ought to, if only to see what the rest of the world looks like, and who lives there and how. Still, my friend has got the feeling about England right. The countryside is in fine fettle just now—Nature's side of it, anyway. First-rate crops of roots for the cattle, storing up a mite of the present sun's essences in their succulence which will make the manger-feed in February more than palatable. And the same is true of the sugar-beet. We shall hear of some bumper crops for the factories. As for potatoes, they're a veritable perplexity. Season, soil and a high skill in production

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threaten the farmer once again with the same sort of nonsensical calamity we are now so used to. Abundant crops, blundered independently and irregularly into market, threaten to bring him worse prices than if he had been blessed with only half a crop. Still, he's beginning to scratch his head about such predicaments. A frequent expression on his lips, "it can't be right for things to be so," is a pointer.



THE swallows went before they need have done. The bees have ventured out of their holes and hives, glad of such a warm chance to stretch their wings in a midday sunshine day after day this past week. Sweet-peas and roses persist with their blooming. Runner beans with their scarlet flowers, and the pink blossom on an apple tree that always seems to want to be something out of the ordinary, give a touch of defiance to the garden's reluctance to acknowledge the beckonings of winter.

And as for the men who work in the fields, they spread the renewing dung from one little heap after the other as though none of the world's troubles mattered as much as keeping ahead of the plough, already hard on their heels. The threshing tackle, engine, drum and elevator for the straw, have started out on their usual round of the stackyards. Yet if it wasn't that we want some straw to cover in the hay and corn ricks, few would be bothering much about this job just now. Much of the grain is damp and can dry out better where it is than lying upon a barn floor, though if ever wealth can be

made to look its real self, it is to see it piled to an arm's length, grain upon grain of golden wheat in some poor man's granary.

Hay is a crop of which there's most to sell. The man is lucky who has found a customer willing to pay a price per ton that will leave some cash in his pocket after "making," "trussing" and delivery costs are paid. Neighbours with surplus stacks about which they'd like to turn into money, cast envious eyes over the gate of the man fortunate enough to want the hay-tier's skilled services to cut out a stack and weigh the trusses on the "press." But before they congratulate him about the deal, they make quite certain that this is not merely his way of paying a long-standing account with the miller or merchant. No machine has yet come along to take the place of hay-tier. He can still make his sixteen shillings a day "pressing" a couple of ton "if it comes out right," as old Amos puts it to you when you meet him. I met him only the other day after a lapse of time that had turned his life's pages well over the eighty. "Thought you were dead and gone," was my hearty greeting. "Not yet, and I'll be lasting out a good many more on 'em afore I does that, though you be lookin' damm well yerself"—looking me over. Amos is lame, from a farm-yard accident—"happened when I was foreman over at Long Bucksford for Mr. Clarkson that was"—but he still gets in a week's work on and off. "Y' can't allus earn your eight shillun a ton. Same as may be 'tis wet and you'm bound to make allowance for the time it takes a man to get from place to place. Besides, there bain't all that amount o' hay sold these days wi' all these 'ere cars runnin' the roads."

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I told him of a likely job near me, and the touch was almost companionable that he gave to the broad-bladed knife tucked under his arm, its edge almost as fine as a razor's, and protected by a rough wooden guard bound to the blade by two lengths of binder twine tied in a pair of most fastidious bows. That knife was his livelihood, and had been for at least half his long life. And he held it like a person more than grateful that at least one dear friend would stand by him to the end of his days. Amos asked after "the changes in your part of the country." Being Michaelmas, there were a good many. We "ran" over the farms that he knew. He had worked some time or other on them all, and judged the worth of a man's farming skill by the way he "had his stacks built."

"A man's no sort of a farmer who spoils good hay by builden 'es stacks all wrong so that they lets the wet in." I agreed. As we parted, Amos reminded me of where he "could allus be found." He still lived "in the same bit of a house in St. Nicholas-lane." That would find him always.



"SOME of them town fellers 've quaint ideas in their heads about farmin'. They happen on y'r place in the summer-time, help collect a few eggs, and then when it comes along the winter-time, with English eggs marked up in the shops at two bob or half-a-crown a dozen, they think to themselves, 'My word, that farmer bloke must be makin' a reg'lar mint o' money at that price.'"

A few words in passing on a Sunday morning. "How were the hens doing?" "A bit better than they were, else a while back they'd fallen off quite a lot with the dry weather, same as the cows."

I knew what my countryman neighbour meant. He had the holiday visitor in mind who was never more pleased than when he could make a round of the yards "picking up eggs." When it comes to egg-laying, nearly all birds keep to their own nests. Not so the hen. We've managed to knock that idea out of her head, more or less. There are some hens that on free range still prefer a nest of their own in a bed of nettles or down in a grassy hedge-bottom. But "laying away" is not encouraged. So that when the town visitor paid his visit in the summer once or twice a day to the same nest and found an egg, or three or four, every time he did so, he was apt to jump to wrong conclusions. That's just what some do, and it tints their notion of farming felicities alarmingly for ever after. The modern hen may be little more than an egg-making machine, but is not machine-like enough yet to lay more than an egg a day at the best of times, and that's when they're not "two bob a dozen," but more like ninepence. A man with a hundred hens thinks he's doing well enough if he's getting his thirty eggs a day just now.

And the man getting fifty is doing right well. But, take the year through, the months when eggs are dearest are the months when most poultry-keepers have few or none to sell, and the hens cost more to keep. The keenest men set out for the winter egg, but the older hands at the game are still doubtful whether there's very much in it, "taking a long view on it." An egg at

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1 $\frac{3}{4}$ d., or 1s. 9d. the dozen—about the present price—looks a better proposition than one at $\frac{3}{4}$ d. or 9d. the dozen.

But that's not their way of looking at it. They tot it up something like this.

If three hens will each lay an egg a day from April to June sold at a little better than $\frac{3}{4}$ d. apiece, that may well work out better in the finish than three hens who lay only an egg a day between them, worth a shade under 2d., from October to December. The farming man has his own way of looking at things. The pity is that it's mostly summer-time when he and the townsman meet on the friendliest footing. To meet more often in the winter of their discontents would be the better for understanding.

Early morning milking, when, early as it may be, the sun has been up long enough before you to stir the cows from their green couches under the trees, is a romance even to the man used to it. He goes by whistling under your windows. His call floats over the meadows not unlike a song.

Turn him out of his bed by candlelight now that we've put the clocks back, help him into a pair of heavy boots still clammy from the puddles of the homeward road the night before, bid him open the door to face a mile or two of grey mist and keen air of morning darkness, and it puts something on to the price of a gallon of milk for that man that the dairyman or the farmer doesn't pay him for.

Winter's mud hangs on the heels of countryfolk like a curse. The rain that comes now brings the dirt into the house in a way that's different from that which fell

when you wanted it. Night closes the door not only against itself but against neighbours as well. The social visit to the village hall will be an enterprise. We'll meet there if only to keep up a sort of contact with an outer world. The women in lonely cottages and farmsteads prepare themselves as for a siege. Some will have only their own kin to talk with from one day's end to the other, though the itinerant tradesmen with their vans show a persistence that's extraordinary considering the amount of trade they do. A country baker carries a few loaves a long way on his arm. Field-gates and farmyards would seem to be greater impediments than they are.

All the same, I wonder that so many of them are so content to journey as far for such little business. Another instance I suppose of "Needs must when the devil drives," fortunately this time for the rural dweller.

Driving rain and a long walk to school is still a bitter memory for lots of us who ran away from it the first chance that came our way. If we went there hungry as well, chilled to the bone, small wonder we learned little and liked our lessons less. The townsman may envy the countryman his life, with ears full of cartage clatter, eyes tired of looking out so perpetually on to red bricks, feet tired of pavements. But he gets a lot of things done for him that are useful. Many a thatched cottage lets in a lot of draughts that one doesn't notice in the summer-time. "I can't face that road" is a frequent excuse that's warrantable. A hot bath would be a boon to a man who's been ploughing all day in a drizzle. Amenities that to the cities are commonplace, with us are rights still to be fought for. Many a thing that most

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people to-day take for granted as making life decent and bearable, we wait for yet in our hamlets and villages.

The wind, which only rattles your windows, makes much of our work tiresome and keeps so many of us in. A mile or two of really muddy road makes a lot of difference to one's outlook and interests. The countryman feels he's cut off from a lot of things that most other folk are used to. In fact, he's prone to think he puts more into the pot of life than he takes out. There's not much left to him of his wheat by the time it gets back to him as bread. He feels like that a little bit by the time it gets to January.



“THE last of the plums!” I was fruit-buying in a Croydon shop and a keen salesman had caught the flicker of hesitation as my eye roved over his wares. We could do with a few more plums for jam. Ours had been a failure this year. But these looked a bit shrivelled up as though they had felt the cold before being picked. Still this man knew his job. He wasn't having those plums left on his hands on a Saturday night. “English y' know!” I'd as good as guessed so on the first glance. “But yer can depend on 'em. Lovely flavour. Jest you tike a tiste ov 'em.” A broad hand, open palm uppermost, stretched towards the purple heap, frank and inviting. Tiers upon tiers of apples stared me in the face. Glorious apples brought to this suburban shop from every corner of this wonderful old earth. The modern fruit shop, what a veritable “Garden of Eden” it has

become! Put one foot over its threshold and you fall. But apples I really didn't want. The folk at home would have picked a few bushels off our own trees while I'd been away.

"Oranges? A fresh consignment jest in from Brazil." But oranges we now buy by the box for a young household, who never seem to grow tired of them. Besides, they work out cheaper that way, so we like to think. I have my doubts; more get eaten. Still, they'd cost a deal more at our cottage door bought from the pedlar. He reckons to be paid for coming out by putting a trifle on to the shop price of the towns. It's not always cheap to live in the country. That's why the buses are proving so popular with the women-folk for shopping expeditions.

One of these shrewd housewives always "reckons" to save the cost of the bus fare on a joint of meat alone. "And by the time I've bought me groceries, there's enough over for an hour at 'the pictures.'"

So, besides the plums, I took a few grapes from that Croydon shop. Oranges, bananas, grapes, fruits one can't grow and couldn't afford until but a few years since, are now becoming rather like a necessity. That salesman had something complimentary to say about most things in his shop. Tomatoes! They came from Worthing, "so what could you have better than that? Feel 'em; firm as a rock!" Such a salesman could have kept me in his shop for hours. His parting word, holding a long bag up by one twisted ear whilst with the other hand he gave me my meagre change, was, "You'll find those plums just the thing." Was he expecting me to do the jam-making? Anyhow, jam-making's by no

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means a lost art in our household, fortunately. It's blackberry and apple at the moment.

Expeditions down the old lane for the one and a short ladder up the "Bramley Seedling" for the other, provide ingredients competitive with even my friend at Croydon. And the "home-grown" part of the business puts a flavour into the jam that defies analysis. The well-run, farm-provided country kitchen more than holds its own against the modern confectioner, admirably though he conducts his enterprises.

There is a woman in our neighbourhood who has fingers that have built up "a round" of customers over a wide area sufficient to keep two vans going. None of the model bakeries can touch her trade. You've only to take one bite of her cake, say at a friend's house, and you promptly ask for the address of such an artist in confectionery. Unfortunately she has only one pair of hands, so as likely as not one must be content to be put upon her waiting list. I heard her praises sung at a recent ploughing-match, where most of a locality's activities come under review at some time or other in the course of the day. You keep your eye on the ploughing, but proceed to talk over the ways of the world in general. The lady-baker's name cropped up as an instance of "someone at any rate who seemed to be making a go of things these days."

But for the rest, to use the words of a man who has never faltered before in a long life at farming, "I can't piece things together nohow. I'm gettun' that I jest dread takin' anything to market, no matter what it is."



IT can't be long now before we have to keep the cows in at night. Yet there have been days this last week as balmy as spring. Broken clouds have let through a warm sun, the cattle sprawling as indolently as they would on a June morning amid a wealth of tussocky grass that should stand them in good stead well up to Christmas.

"There's more grub about than I remember." And the man who said so knew his way over most of the farms hereabouts.

Mending a gap in the hedges—for when the leaves fall, weak places show themselves—Harry, the dealer, would ask: "D'you know anyone who wants a good cow? They tell me you're after a few more." There's something off-hand about the way he does his business. One hand in a hip-pocket and the other flicking a short cane against his left leather legging, he accepts a joking negative as sufficient answer and without umbrage. "Not if she's that old 'screw' I saw you buy over at Widow Scandler's sale the other day. I wouldn't have let you have her if I'd fancied her. One can always go a pound more than a dealer at a sale for a cow if she's worth having." But whilst he's with you, Harry takes a look round. "Nice bunch of heifers you've got across the way! One there I don't like, though. Got a bit of a cocked horn and moves sleepy like." And you proceed to tell him where the "bunch" came from and what you gave for them and how you came by the sleepy one with the cocked horn. "I'll get rid of her when she's calved down if I don't like the look of her then." One can almost see Harry making a mental note of the remark. And he'll remember her, too, if ever she gets to a market where he happens to be. He'll find his way

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round the "ring" to one's side. "Isn't she the cow——?" and so on, tapping the upturned toe-end of his boot with the short cane, looking her over from muzzle to tail-tip.

"How did the rest of the heifers turn out? I must slip round and take another look at 'em before long." There's no particular reason why he should do so except that's his way of keeping in touch with his clientèle. "Yes, do, and we'll have a cup of tea ready for you if you happen to come about the right time."

Always cows with Harry. He sometimes looks at a horse, but never sheep. "I leaves them to old Bonny-foot." Getting a herd of cows together takes one far afield. Here in Sussex milk sells as well as anywhere else in the country. The South Coast towns want all the milk and cream you can send them in the summer-time, and London in the winter. So with a reasonable price to be got for milk the year through, cows in this part of the world "make their money" as a rule. The shrewder among us go down the West Country when they're buying in a few more, or up the Shires somewhere. But the best couple standing in our stalls are a pair of heifers bought off a small place right at our gate.

A woman can rear young farm-stock better than the best of cowmen if she's the mind for it. These two passed through the hands of a woman of that kind. Quietly handled, hand-fed and groomed, she's turned out a pair of graceful creatures able to fill a bucket apiece every time you sit down on a milking-stool beside them. One still blares for her calf, a sturdy offspring, fortunately female. Coming "out" of a good cow, as we say, she is to be kept, and in about four years she will

join her mother in the stalls, we hope. So, slowly, are the best herds built up. A bull of the right sort—with ancestors right back to a great-granddam and a great-grandsire of unimpeachable qualities, takes pride of place. But a few cows in the herd, steadily impressing their breeding virtues and their milking manners on the observant dairy-farmer or his man, become the selected mothers of the herd to be. Here's where the small man gets his chance. A few acres and good foundation stock, and he can win a reputation that brings him good business. The strain of forced feeding and heavy production in a large dairy herd tends to lower the stamina of the offspring.

The small man, "feeding" more frugally, perhaps, but more naturally, with the younger stock coming to his call, sucking his very coat-tails as he fills up their trough for the twice-daily meals, will always find a niche in the most modern of farming times. Where animals are concerned there is a limit to factory-like considerations. The Danes have found this out with their pigs. The fatteners are the large-scale men. But the best breeder is more often than not just the peasant woman with her couple of sows that she treats as children. And the poultry-keeper with his thousands of laying hens is more and more turning to the out-of-the-way poultry farm, with its few dozen hens that strut and peck round the feet of folk who can give a name to every feathered friend about the place.



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I AM in the heart of the Midlands, electioneering. Sussex and those oak beams holding up that stone-tiled roof we call "home," already seems part of an old-world life that could never have been mine. I'm daily amongst mining villages, rows of bricked boxes, whose upper windows look out across a range of fields and wooded hedges, but whose kitchen outlook is so often not much more than just a blank wall and a yard of soil.

When all this is over, win or lose, I'll be in Sussex again, if only for a run round the garden and a look over the old house. But the sunshine makes me wonder what I've missed. Surely there never can come again in my lifetime such an autumn of summer's afterglow as this one has given us. But a deal of old England's glory is that no matter what part of the country one may be in, there will be found a corner so rich in history or so endowed with natural beauty that the heat of the battle is cooled down by its sheer charms alone.

Yesterday I tumbled hot-foot into a little place, intent on winning over its few and placid inhabitants to my cause. Soton Chenies is a hamlet set down in one of the dips of an undulating pastoral bit of our English countryside that lies contented and unperturbed by a crude industrial activity that goes on both sides of it. Standing guard over the small group of cottages huddling snugly close to a high and lichened wall, boundary to a wide estate, a Tudor Manor's windows flashed out a blaze of welcome caught from the setting sun. There was no doubting that this Manor was the mistress of the place. It was her spell that laid a queer sort of heaviness about the limbs of the few folk who ventured out to listen to my burning oratory.

They might listen, but I knew that she would be telling them what she thought about it all as soon as my back was turned. Now and again I caught sight of her grey face, flushed here and there with lines of red, weathered brick. A pair of twisted chimney-stacks and some gabled windows that, in the evening light, gave the effect of puckered eyebrows, added something whimsical to her ancient serenity.

Time, bending over the comings and goings of more than four centuries of years, had whispered too many of life's secrets into her ears for her to be afraid of anything that might come through me. Inside her walls the wine-glasses would clink over the scared gossip of any electoral progress of a Socialist, "as Red as any of them."

Her thick masonry was evidently not thick enough, these days at any rate, to keep out the fear of such a foe's victory striking subtler blows than any mediæval cannon-ball. And leaning against this Manor's outer walls, when darkness had well covered up the day's doings, a dozen men and youths ran over my arguments again, subduing their comments to a turgid muttering that only walls could overhear.

Meantime I'd gone on to meet a friend up from the South with news of home. "What were they doing there?" "How were the cow and calf?" "Had Pilcher started rabbiting again?" "Jem" Pilcher is an old hand at this rabbiting business. I had only to mention his name and my mind set itself to roam the fields and hedgerow burrows in his shrewd old company. For ten minutes I was down on my knees again helping him "put the couples" together and feeling the cold wetness

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of the dewy grass soaking its way through the coarse cloth of my breeches.

A deep draught of my own county's news and I was a readier man for the evening's platform again, though feeling more like a citizen of two phantom worlds than ever I have done before. I went on summoning men to this or that with the windowed eyes of that ancient Manor-house still looking on suspiciously at what I did.



TOO much wet! Gateways are like bogs already, and will be so now for the rest of the winter. A great pity! Mud, an arch-enemy of refinement, lays one by the heels literally, all too soon in the season. Boots, little and big, "rubbers" and hob-nailed, lie scattered around the back door just where the tired, complaining hands have dragged them off the weary feet. How glad the folk were to throw them there after squelching round the yards and fields for yet another wet day, and make for the lamp-light and fireside within. Not because it was cold but because it would be cheerful.

The last man home, as he sat on the step outside to struggle with the slimy knots of leather laces, could hear the children prattling over their parlour games, strewn about the kitchen floor. Soon it would be their bedtime. It was his roof they were under. Evidently they were happy. Most men brood a little whilst unlacing heavy boots after a day's toil round in them. The babble of young voices, one quarrelsome, another triumphant, rising above the general murmur now and then, settle a good many things for him. The dull ache

of weariness gives way to a more whimsical, inspiring view of things. For it's usually after the wild day's buffetings that "the father" in us is ready enough to take a place on the floor with the children.

"And haven't you to go out again this evening?" "No, thank God!" "Then let's have a bit more wood on the fire!" It is still wood with us. Faggots for kindling, though the grocer's glad enough to sell a cart-load of boxes whenever we want them for that purpose. Wild weather shakes a lot of dead stuff out of the big trees, but we need a deal more than this for the fires we keep going.

Every now and then we fell a giant or two, taking care to see that there's a sapling left in the hedge somewhere or other to take each place. And it's not always a forest tree that should come down, though the caterpillars keep up their havoc in the oaks. Elms, too, must be "topped." But many an orchard could do with a few young trees. In fact, so pest-ridden and cankered are the usual run of farm orchards, that it would pay to break up another acre or so somewhere else about the place and plant new. That's what we're doing with a couple of acres. And now's the time to be thinking about it. The trees are bought. Mostly apples of standard varieties. It's only the leisured or the well-established can afford to experiment. Getting the ground right is going to be the trouble. With no more rain for a month, the land would be wet enough, and, in any case, we must have it drained.

After that, we've the rabbits to think about. A wood near by is alive with them. Nothing would delight them more than to round off an evening meal, especially

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when the frosts come along, with a few nibbles of young apple bark. And once they've pursued their liking for such savouries that unfortunate tree's death warrant has been duly signed. Wiring, therefore, has become a matter of urgency. But the man whose opinion we are ruled by takes a modern view about fruit-tree planting. He's for putting 350 trees to the acre, which settles the wiring issue for me. There's nothing for it but a rabbit-proof fence round all sides of the new orchard.

I've an idea that rabbits, peeping behind bramble leaves and thickets, when they see a new fence going up, wink to each other, and think it a fine joke that anyone exists who really believes that even the smallest meshes can ever keep a rabbit out of a country garden or an orchard! Well, we're going to have a try. But we shall be obliged to sink our meshes a few inches beneath the soil if we are to upset our woody neighbours' calculations.

Rabbits have their sentimental friends. On a summer evening after rain, with the trees' shadows stretching like church spires across a field, one sees a few "bunnies" sitting on their haunches in the interstices of sunlight, twirling their whiskers or just taking a look round—and, well, one feels inclined to forgive them lots of things. But once you've had a young orchard ruined by one of their moonlight orgies, or find that your only plot of winter greens have had their heads bitten off most wantonly, then you register a vow of frightfulness that surprises even yourself by its ferocity.



WITH due apologies to Jerome, I feel that what I have to write might well be described as "the idle thoughts of a busy fellow." And a very busy one at that, I can assure you! But if ever I've scoffed at the idea that the average man—and I'm only an average man—has a dual personality, I'll never scoff again after this week. I might tear round from committee room to committee room, enthusiastic meeting to meeting, but as soon as my back was turned upon those eager, hustling scenes, Nature met me in the intervening country spaces to check my feverish exultations with her frosted beauties.

She never failed to give me my bearings. A night-sky full of stars and the days spread full out to gather up a coming winter's store of sun should be enough to keep any man on a mission both sane and gallant. Little more than a week ago and every tree was full of leaf, curled up a little, and tinted, it's true, with the usual intimations of a senile decline.

Then came a night of silent frost. The misty gnomes came up from their caverns in the earth to keep a rendezvous with icy airs bent on mischief from the far North-East. Together, hand-in-hand, they danced round every delicate flower they could find. Chrysanthemums hung their proud heads, never to lift them again. Brave garden borders that had held out sturdily against wet and wind took fright at this white apparition clutching at their delicate throats. They just died of shock then and there. Up all the trees these two wantons climbed, to lay their shrivelling fingers on every join of leaf-stem to twig and branch that they could reach. And when the morning came, the sun chased them

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away like a good-humoured, buxom matron making pretence to chase a pair of naughty children down the road who'd knocked upon her door for devilment and nothing more.

Now, take a far look out of every country window with a view, and the limbs of almost every kind of English forest tree glisten bare and black to stand out bleakly against the sky-line for the rest of the year. In fact, so will they stand until the spring urge of the sap rises again. As one might have expected, most of the oaks held out the best. There's one old fellow—I've talked about him before—who, I've no doubt at all, stands yet in Sussex clothed in a late summer's full glory, no matter from which quarter of the field you take a look at him. I count on him as one of my life's best counsellors, and on my return home shall glance at his direction instinctively to note the dignity with which he meets his fate, come wind, sun, frost, rain or drought.

But what a "back-end" this has been for the ploughing! There shouldn't be a stubbled acre that's not turned over by end of the month. And to turn the sod over with such sun's glow on it as has been the chance lately, is to turn in qualities as rich in their harvest yield as any top-dressing of manure could provoke. To plough in the sun so at this time of year is to mate the sky with the earth in as perfect a matrimony as can be conceived. There are some chances that are given to us that can be only God-given and, to farming folk, October has been one of them. At any rate, that's an opinion I overheard a man of the road make. This local carrier, old-fashioned and content enough still to ply his

neighbourly business by horse and van, is also a local preacher. And for him, as he listens to plaint and comment at cottage doors and garden gates, God is always in His Heaven; therefore, all's right with the world.

If I were cast in humbler mould, I'd envy that man his job. His best business is done when we feel he has obliged us the most. The village carrier and the local preacher are both forces who have played a bigger part than is often allowed for, in keeping the countryside in touch with a wider, and in a sense a higher world. Their story ought to be told before the motor and the teacher take our country ways too definitely in hand.



ODD jobs for the wet days in winter on the farm are getting fewer than they used to be. And it's hard lines on the men. It has all come about in the last few years. The time was when no farmer, however hard or mean, would take it into his head to stand a man off just because of wet or a few inches of snow. He'd have been given a bad name to have done so, on all sides. Then, a man would have been found a job in the barn, mending bags, dressing corn, tidying up the stackyard a bit, white-liming the cow-stalls or sawing wood. But who bothers much about dressing corn for market nowadays? Enough for a good-looking sample, perhaps! But barely more, for the merchant who buys to resell again prefers to attend to this little matter himself.

He's put in the very latest machinery for doing so. He's proud of it, and, except for one or two, he doesn't

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trust the average farmer to send his wheat in up to sample. That's what they tell you when you talk to them. So the man on the farm has one job less to do when the threshing is over. As for sawing wood, an oil engine and a circular saw can get through a pile in half a day that would have kept a man busy all his idle days. Bags! Who takes any count of bags these days? They used to be charged for; now they're not, so it doesn't pay to bother about mending. But another job is lost to the man on the farm. A cheap lot at sales is usually the cake-grinder. Why? Because not many farmers buy their cattle cakes in slabs these days, except perhaps a bit of cotton seed or linseed occasionally. The rest come along as nuts, leaving the cowman nothing to do but give the cows a bowlful of "rations" twice a day. But "cracking" cake has kept many a man busy on a cold day in years gone by.

Perhaps the worst blow of all came with the sugar-beet, a crop that might have a lot to be said for it on other grounds, but scarcely any on this. A man and his mate may be able to earn a trifle extra up to December "topping and tailing" a few acres at piece rates. But after that the roads and the local relief committee for them. As before, the farm-carter picks up the small heaps of beet dotted everywhere about the fields, except that he tips the loads into one grand heap at the field-gate or the lane-side for the contractor and his motor-lorry to take away to the factory. And that's the last many a farm-worker sees of the roots that he used to tend from seeds to slicer. Now, the same lorry which took away the tons of beet brings back a load or two of pulp for the farmer, who wants it to feed his cows or

cattle. The factory only wanted the sugar content; the shredded residue is a bullock feed. Mangolds and swedes on such a farm can take a back seat, and, for that matter, so can one or two men for the rest of the winter. At one time they would have carted the mangolds and swedes right home to clamps handy by the yards and stalls, thatch them in with straw and soil against frost and rain, open an end up as the cowman wanted, tip a few loads on the barn-floor, and "of a wet day," one man feed the hopper and another turn the handle of a pulper, making a pile, mixed with chaff, "as high as y' like," of succulent forage for the cowhouse or bullock-yards. A task to get weary about, but not half so wearisome as having nothing to do. No wonder men wander away to the country town and watch with jealous eyes fellows more fortunately employed. The old chap in charge of the engines at the local timber yard lets them in "for a warm," if the wind's keen, for winter keeps him busier than they. Or they put their names down hopefully for the brickyard foreman should he want a man in the spring.

Some trek further afield with a vow in their hearts never to touch a hoe or a horse again. Mother Earth loses her sons for the bitterest of reasons. Every now and again one catches a glimpse over hedges, say, of a team of horses and a mowing machine trimming up the sedges and thistles that missed the sickle in the summer-time. The land too wet for ploughing, the good man thinks of his grass. But as often as not it's the family farm finds the job to be getting on with, no matter the wind or the weather; it's that man's son with a hand on the reins, not a labourer's.

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Gates to mend, roof tiles to look to, field-drains to lay, hedges to cut back, trees to cut down, ditches to open up—a thousand jobs will stare the lot of us in the face because a few haven't the courage and the rest haven't the ha'pence to set about them. Maybe if the land belonged to the same people who own the roads, folk out of a job who know more about land-making than they do about road-making might find a slasher and swop-hook more handy tools than a pick and shovel!



"I DIDN'T give you me vote, mister. Not as how I don't respect you and y'r opinions, 'cos I do. But——" And here Jabez made a slight movement with his head as though about to look over his shoulder to make sure no one else was listening. Then he went on: "You can't persuade me yet awhile that them other folks don't know just how a man votes, 'cos I can tell 'ee they do." I must have betrayed dissent by a disappointed glint in my eyes, or perhaps my silence was a shade too grim. Anyhow, I offered neither reproof nor criticism.

As soon as we met in the lane down against Duck's Bridge, two days after the poll was declared, I knew how Jabez had voted. He wasn't as ready to stand and talk as usual. In fact, from quite a distance off he was obviously pulling himself together to face out the awkward encounter. "How d'you think they know?" I ventured. "That I can't tell 'ee," answered Jabez. "All as I can say is, that the very next morning following

polling-day, 'long comes Master Jephson riding his big chestnut mare. I was keeping meself well inside the blacksmith's, but he pulled up and bade us a 'very nice day,' so we had to more or less come outside and have a word wi' 'un."

" 'I'm glad you voted for the right man, Jabez.' That was just how he said it, so I guessed he knew. 'Yes, sir,' I answered 'n back, 'we'm got him in agen.' He never stopped long after that. Seemed as if he might be off huntin'. Most of the gentry round puts in two or three days a week this time o' year.'" I had to tell the harassed Jabez that the "ballot-box was a deal more secret about a man's vote than many a poor man's eyes could afford to be, and I'm not blaming you when I know you live in Jephson's cottage and your son works at his place."

Buppleton is not much more than a hamlet, just a few cottages straddling the four corners of two crossing roads. Times without number I had passed those tight-fastened front doors. The folk behind them were saying nothing. They were all tenants of Sir Alfred Hope, an elastic manufacturer, knighted for his services during the War. At the "count" I was curious to observe the opening of Buppleton's ballot-box. There were only four votes for me. I thought a good deal of those four votes. I knew Buppleton. Whose could they be? I could only make a guess, feeling pretty certain as to two of them, a roadman and his wife's. His must have been that big, bold cross stretched right across from corner to corner of the space set apart for it opposite my name. Maybe hers was that tiny mark, hardly decipherable as a cross, tucked away in a corner, as though the person who

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put it there was daring to do the biggest thing of her life. I felt sure it was the vote of a woman, possibly wife of a man whose job might be imperilled by her act if it were known. She at any rate believed that "the ballot is secret," for she could trust herself, woman-like, to give nothing away by either word or look afterwards.

I, or any other, might call a dozen times at her cottage, catching her at the wash-tub, the ironing or the baking, and yet leave that friendly house not one whit the wiser as to her politics. "Jim can vote as he likes. I keeps me vote to meself." And keep it she certainly would against all comers.

Two men leaning over a gate were ready enough to confirm a story I'd been told in another village, that a stranger had turned in at the local "pub" and "stood 'em each a drink three times all round." He parted with the enlivened company on the understanding that they "could expect a free night at the 'Bull and Bush' after the declaration, if So-and-So gets in." They'd "never set eyes on him afore. He drove away in a big blue car." Villages have still their Victorian ways when it comes to the old-time tricks of the political trade. It takes courage of the finer sort to foil the pressures that are still blatantly exercised to keep the English countryside politically intact.

I'll never hold back my highest tributes to the men and women of a thousand villages throughout our land who dare to vote for whom they please. It is still a duty by no means as easy to perform in many parts as it ought to be.



DOGS prefer to lick their own wounds, and there are people like that. I talked with two last week on a little farm. Tucked away behind the church of a West-Country village, I came across a farmyard so empty as to be desolate. The autumn sun throws long shadows and a place that is spick and span can feel deserted if there's not even a cat or dog to be seen. A rap on the door sounded noisy. The "come in" was hardly a welcome. Nobody seemed to mind who walked in or out of the house. The stone floors gave a chilly feel to the passages. The man and the woman stood together as I entered the room, a slight tinge of resentment indefinably indicated in the cold courtesy of the handshakes.

A couple of proud people, struck at savagely by a misfortune behaving as whimsically as a whirlwind, they had nothing that they wished to speak about to a stranger. A day and a night of it and 'twas all over. A few sheep, some pigs and a dozen cows had been burnt to a cinder. The cattle plague had broken out among their little herd, so there was nothing else for it. These had to go, but they'd rather not talk about it. The man hadn't been out of the house for a week. And for that matter, nor had other folk bothered about him. Perhaps they felt it better to keep away. It was right that they should, for there was no telling how the disease might spread.

The whole affair was the biggest thing that had ever happened to them. They felt as if they were bruised all over. They said so. But they were standing their ground. He talked by and by of "stocking up again as soon as they'll let me. Better it happened to me than some other folk in the place. Fortunately, we've bin a

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bit careful or the thing would have ruined us." Outside his back door was a young ash that had shed its leaves in a night. Every limb was now bared for the rest of the winter. Not a breath of wind had disturbed the mouldering cluster lying there every bit like shorn tresses from a pretty head.

There was something so sorrowful in the look of it. It stood out alone in its nakedness, for the oak and the elm of the neighbourhood, made of sterner stuff evidently, showed surprisingly small disposition to yield to the inevitable yet awhile. But Somerset's a green county any time of the year. The hedges blanch a bit with the frost perhaps, but its grass keeps its colour even to the tops of its pleasant hills. In my part of the world the several commons turn a rich brown, a harvest of bracken bedding to save hay and ha'pence for the smaller men. The season's last job for the scythe, they rake thick swathes into heaps to carry when they've time. And time is weather such as we've had of late, the best of a century, and therefore the busiest for pony and cart, still the transport of the little men who get a fair part of their living by what they can make off the common they've lived against most of their days.

Our chalky hills go taciturn when the colder winds whistle along their upper ledges or a dry autumn fails to render aid to a rootlet's loosening grip on life. For we've had none too much rain for some things.

Peter gave us a bit of a shock the other morning. Dull skies are deceiving, the few there have been recently. "The soft water tank's pretty nigh empty." Soft water's a stand-by for us when well water is as tough a proposition as ours is. But we don't reckon to get such

warnings from Peter in November. Next month the experts will be telling us what a wonder year it's been. So it has in many ways, but we shall be fools if we forget in too much of a hurry one or two of the things it has pointed out about the limitations of our water supplies.

Another fault Peter finds with the weather is "the digging." That gets worse instead of better. He's breaking up a piece of new land to try out potatoes in the spring. "You'd be surprised to see how little what rain we've had's gone down." I take a look, but it's best he keeps on with the digging. Frost does more good than a fork later on.

The rats find their way into the barns again. Field ladders are giving out, and dusk sees the scurry of creatures across the dangerous width of the road, creatures who have a price on their heads, and shift from place to place as if they knew it. The boys, too, on their way to school scour the woods for "conkers." But playing with chestnuts is a game that's pretty well done with for another year already. New roofs show through the thinning coverings of trees, their red gleam the intimation that the town creeps ever nearer. I'm not sure if they're as welcome as they might be to some of us. There's a kind of countryman who'd rather go on as he's been in the habit of doing, and feels encroachment as a threat to his immunity.



COUNTRY tongues can wag to pretty themes when the weather's wrong for work, or someone calls to borrow a tool. There's always an hour on a November

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day that most real countrymen can afford to waste, though they'd do better to get right away from the life for a while before discontent sets in. They'd be the better for it, and so might the rest of us. A good many do take advantage of Sundays. The last load home is always the heaviest for the motor-bus. Every roadside "stop" adds its quota of passengers. Familiar greetings are shared with conductor and company. The visiting of relations is a rural traffic that swells with the busman's time-table. Looking friends up helps to make winter a shorter affair, and anything which does that has a lot to be said for it. Clans can gather for a celebration with much more facility—so the pretext grows to keep up the anniversary.

Country-folk are by no means tired of these things. The barn dance has its revival. Even the young people of near-by towns have lately taken to the village hall, with its atmosphere of rusticity, rather than to the more blasé finish of their local "Palais." And they are ready enough to take a risk about the seven miles home after midnight, for the fun of it, if only four wheels can be found to get them there. Perhaps it's the walk home that's the nicest bit of the evening, though romantic night airs, stars and a country lane lose a little of their glamour if the heels are too high or the toe pinches. So many people think shoes don't matter in the country. They do; there's nothing so vital as a stout enough sole when there's country mud at your door. Many of those who come out to us forget as much. It doesn't occur to them, used to pavements as they are.

I've said all this simply because Peter's taken it into his head he'd like a holiday. Twenty-five years is a long

time to be married. It strikes me men of his age must have been prone in those days to pick on their spouses between harvest and Christmas-time. A man can't be married on nothing, and a few shillings a week then must have left precious little for savings. Settling-up for harvest, with its bit of "extra" for overtime, and a few days off afore Christmas, must have coincided with many a single countryman's determination then to look out for another job with a cottage to it. I don't know how it was in Peter's case in the beginning of things. But it struck me as a very proper request for a man to make, that a week away from the common round should mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of a wedding-day. Good luck to him, and for the rest of the journey!

Not everything we've been brought up to has to be cast aside just because there are more books to read or plays to see, or the clergy and the scientist have taken to belabour each other so.

The cross-cut saw has been taken up as a sort of modern hallmark of matrimonial harmony. Things peasant are recovering their repute here, as abroad. As I heard a man say only this week. "Twenty-five years spent of a man's life is a lot. But what is twenty-five years in the life of the soil?"



ONE has to fight hard with one's moods in November. A grey pall hangs over everything. The warm airs of the south-west keep up their tussle with the on-pressing, ever-encroaching chilly currents from the North. Smoke screens of mist and cloud hide the unequal contest

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from us. Unfortunately, Britain is their battle-ground. The sea hates to part with the sun, even if it is to be only for a few months. And we live on the edge of the sea. But the white peaks of Norway frown down at such unseasonable reluctance. The already frozen Russian steppes add their spiteful protest. East joins with North, and few of us mortals really appreciate their mocking company under a grey sky.

The countryman's greeting notes the change. He stops the postman at the top of the hill, a worker with two miles of his cross-country round behind him, even though it's still only a bit after seven o'clock. "Begins to look a little like snow, don't y' think?" He thinks the same, but hopes we shan't get a fall yet awhile. The fields are just beginning to pick up after last month's rains. The postman would like "to see it keep fine from now on to Christmas." There's no need to ask him why. One knows his rounds. His tracks lie over a dozen fields of Sussex clay, and the nearer we get to Christmas the more inclusive his calls become.

Cottages without a letter throughout the rest of the year—and there are some as lonesome as that—have some sort of remembrance left at their door between now and then. I have my doubts, though, about one place, whose red roof gleams, wet with morning mist, through the labyrinth of the trees' bare limbs. Does the postman ever call here with more than a bill for hen-corn? I often wonder, but find it too delicate a question to ask.

And I've seen the other side of the picture on the other side of the world. Remembrance has its rituals. The moment we begin to feel the coming of Christmas,

kinder thoughts begin to tug at our hearts. Friends find their way to far places. We seem to stay more or less where we are. The same round on the farm, the same train to the office, except that the farm does at least change its jobs with the days.

Quite half of our own troubles rise out of our restlessness. 'Tis so in my case. One envies the folk at times who set a limit to their dreams. A gay garden is cabaret enough for them. And there are women who see a second chance in their children. "Making and mending" only serves to add fuel to their contentment. I've watched one face sitting in the lamplight. The feet of the baby socks too small yet to squeeze a mother's hand in. But that daughter is already helping in the kitchen, and will later bring her school tales home until, in the fullness of things, the child will share her more womanly secrets with her mother-friend. Once the night falls and the fire is aglow on the hearth, the domestic door shuts out the noisy world. The woman shuts it. She's having no more of it for that day.

And there's the family aunt—same as she ever was; gets more fun out of her knitting book for that week than a whole year of newspapers. She amazes me. A dim authority decrees that her wee income, for she's Scottish right enough, must be cut by no less than a third. It might have been "an act of God" for all the fuss she makes of it. She has a cottage by the side of the road. The children call there with messages, if only to take a short look round her pantry-shelves. The pathway to her door is twice-arched with roses. Every window-sill has its conventional flower-pot. She bends neither knee before any modern altars. The naughtiest

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joke of the latest West-End variety would slip in one ear and out of the other with her, killed stone-dead by an innocence as unruffled at sixty as it was at sixteen. And this woman "retired" to the country to live because she "thought it would be cheaper," and she "liked a garden away from the smoke" at a time in life when she had zest enough yet to enjoy it. Mark the sense of the woman. And she looks no older now than ten years since.

Knock at one door after another about these lanes and such are the folk you can still meet. Charlie Kilhams, as alive as you are, sixty-four and a half years working on the same farm and gets as good a laugh out of his days as most of the folk I saw on Brighton front the other Sunday. How do such people do it? A restless age might be the happier for knowing.



IN the course of my journeyings lately, and they've been pretty well here, there and everywhere, I met a small group of village lads who did more in a short five minutes to stir up my thinking than most of what has happened to me in months. There were two ways into the place. I didn't know which to take. One road would take me a good ten miles out of my way. The other and I'd be in the village within two hundred yards. The dry leaves of the hedges made little noises as the chill wind passed over them. The dark ridge of a distant hill stood out in the night sky.

It had the glare of a big city behind it. At its foot huddled a few lights, a village more on the highway of

things than the one I was seeking. And in between, just a wide stretch of blackness and emptiness that might be forest or nightmare as the mind fancied. Out of that blackness stepped a man, his hands in hip pockets like a navvy, not much out of his teens, yet with a growl in his voice like someone in a mood of perpetual grudge.

"Things haven't gone well with this man," I thought. "How d'you get to so-and-so; d'you mind telling me?" I said out loud. But I needn't have asked him. He'd guessed my business. Meetings weren't so common a feature of that village's life as to make unaccountable the comings and goings of strangers. But the way pointed out, the directions gone over at least three times, need never put an end to conversation started up in a lane, no matter how casually. Curiosity is a mutual vice. "Wondering who people really are" is more than a pastime for countrymen. The pattern of daily life is woven out of it still for folk with time on their hands.

But now, four other youths had come out of inky nowhere to join us. At least they looked little more than youths, though I heard afterwards two were married but living with parents. All five were out of work. Had been for months. A grass country, they'd helped a bit at hay-time. Nothing much in that, and that was all. One father kept two sons on a farm labourer's money. But they "couldn't sit at home." That's why they took up their stance at the cross-roads each night.

And in the day there was an ignominious walk of three miles each way, morning and night, to and from the district workhouse, to work out their "relief" grants, the rural way of dealing with those without insurance

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nowadays. These young fellows were taking it as a punishment for being out of a job. The work in the world they had to do was a task. There was no pride in it; only shame. Yet if they left it for even a day, to go as far as that glare in the sky, to look for something better, they were obliged to say what they'd been up to when they came back.

A bit of hedging was all a farmer wanted a man for these days. Time was when there was ploughing to be done, but not now.

There wasn't an acre in a hundred under the plough for miles round. Cattle in summer and a few sheep in winter didn't want much looking after. And what else was there in the village for a man to do? The pride in a countryman is a deep thing. You can turn out all your pockets, "means test," they call it, to satisfy the requirements of humiliation in a city, with a deal more composure than can a man whose inquisitors are parish neighbours. It's by no means the same thing to spread one's misery for one as for the other when it comes to the case of the countryman. So fathers prefer to "keep" their sons, and families their daughters, rather than face it.

On their way to the workhouse, my five acquaintances would pass the roadman busy clearing up the autumn leaves. "Working for the council" in his case seemed an honourable pursuit. Just where the margin-line of indignity crept in for them 'twould be hard to say. They worked for the council as well, but not in the same way. Though why not is a shade of distinction on our part, not theirs, too shabby to be defended. Low wages, and now this meaner thing, knock the very

breath of life out of the village that's tied so to land and its misfortunes.

When I got home, they showed me violets growing in the garden. I talked to others able to show me better luck than my five friends so easily left behind in Leicestershire. Just a turn of the road and a wave of the hand and out of sight could be out of mind. A yard full of turkeys is a wealthy sight to pass; the shouts of a couple of children playing sounds so hopeful a thing, and the crackle of big logs up a chimney so worth coming a hundred miles for. But violets and turkeys, children and chimney-corners, only make the fate of the five young men I'd left behind me in Leicestershire seem as undeserved a clout as could be given to any man, and especially a young one.

WINTER

"Mud! We're used to it. Get off what yo' can on that old scraper"—maybe a bit of worn-out scythe or a section of cart-wheel tyre—"and come right in. The men 'll be here d'rectly. They'll have done for t' day and, like enough, glad of a talk with someone."

It's in winter that the farmyards are full. Choose a farm with plenty of straw about. The day's feeding finished, walk round again with the honest man whose job it is to leave every creature content and "bedded down." As you pass by the well-filled stalls, here a cow cuddling again, happy with a new-born calf; there a sleek beast already down for the night; away in some dim shed the scuffle of pigs fighting over the last morsel, you call such a man prosperous.

Outside, a lamp bobs to and fro, a shepherd taking the last look round. New lambs are bleating. Nothing to worry about; the mother ewe has answered. A dog barks in the distance. Gradually the night settles down. The farmhouse smells as snug as the stalls the moment the door opens.

Logs!

DISASTER has an indiscriminate way of descending upon us, and, more often than not, chooses times that merely suit her wantonness. It doesn't take a farming man long to find out that the pious quietude of the Sabbath seems to act more as a stimulant than a spiritual check. Nine times out of ten it's on Sunday when the pigs get out, or somebody else's bullocks break through into one's garden and make a thorough mess of a winter's very precious supply of domestic green-food. If you doubt it, ask a couple of very near neighbours of mine. Fortunately, time has spiced their rueful annoyance with a little relenting humour. Both kept in dispute a certain weak spot in the boundary hedge. Each in turn lost his cabbages. The offending gap has now been most skilfully repaired, and an extra man employed to "take a look round the hedges afore the winter sets in on us."

Of course, as a wiseacre would remind us, that's how things get done. Another favourite time for mischief to run amok is when you think you've finished for the day, and, in the words of a most unfortunate good friend of mine, "just getting nicely settled down after tea in front o' the fire." He and "the missus" are getting on in years. They've worked hard, harder than most without a doubt, and, to use her phrase, "have had to put up with a lot of trouble of one sort and another in our time." But they've been hardest hit this week, almost spitefully, "and for no reason at all as we can see," they said. And they said it contemplating the still smouldering ruins of a barn, cow-stall and haystack burnt down the night before.

Chained to a kennel, the terrier barked an incessant

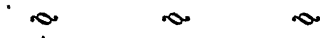
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alarm, timely enough to save them many a hundred pounds, whatever else was lost. The fire broke out during a sulky evening, sullen after an exhausting day of high winds, and broodily dark with clouds more threatening than for a month past. We at home took small notice of a report that there was a deep red glow in the sky in the east. Lewes lies in that direction, so, with a glance at the calendar, we put it down to the Novemberish hilarity of the members of a notorious "bonfire society" located for some queer reason or other in that otherwise over-well-conducted town.

Nothing more was said, though the wish rose in my own mind to go out to aid the fun. I did no more than wish them a good time. I was in the mood to think that it's thoroughly good for people like myself to do something a bit mad or boisterously childish now and again. But there was the trouble of going the seven miles with the slouth of a day's digging and the pleasant humours of a tasty supper hanging heavy on one's limbs. And though the dark night was quiet, one seemed to hear still the deep booming of the day's high wind outside beating against windows that from the inside looked far too cosy to leave for what might prove mere wisps of adventure. Yet all the while that red glow in the sky proved to be a good man's hopes burning to the ground. The newsboy on his morning round was the first with the story. "Mr. Jason's place over at Clayheath." And he jumbled up what he was all eagerness to tell with bits about "firemen picnicking on the top of a haystack in the middle of the night," and "cows smothered under tons of brewers' grains."

Not all he told us was as he put it, but it was bad

enough to beat back all the courage that a man had summoned to face for yet another winter of hard and ill-paid work. The firemen had made the most of their opportunity. They'd put the fire out, or near enough, for there was still a smouldering beam or two about. What wasn't destroyed had been soused thoroughly with pond water to the tune of "400 gallons to the minute," as one eye-witness proudly acclaimed. "And they kept it up for hours!" Country town firemen like "a real good 'un" once in a while, if only for practice. And they're a joy to watch in their more occasional but more heroic roles. The baker, the butcher, the shop assistant in their steel-helmets, blackened in smoke and drenched with water, are men you never saw behind the counter. And when a man stands with his back to the charred heaps of his losses and places a new order with his corn-merchant, an order that says plainly enough that he's ready to start all over again, then that is a man. And that is what I saw Jason do, and I was proud for him.



LESS than a month to Christmas! Yet but a night or two ago I was listening to the evensong of a thrush piped as sweetly as if the time of year was May or June. Barely five o'clock, dusk was spreading in from the east with a pale moon coming up from nowhere, hand-over-fist as it were. On the other side of the world the sun was already well below the horizon. The western sky was a glorious sight, splashed with the after-glow of what might have been a summer's day.

An old bricklayer near by was packing up his tools, it

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being time to be "agettun on home." Bending this way and that, first a trowel, then a rule in his bag, now a sack to throw across the new brickwork, "in case o' frost, though it don't look over-likely," he kept up a talk about the job he's on. Turning sharply for the final look round, he knocked a shovel clattering down a concreted path. Just a noise followed by the moment of silence in which he turned over in his mind what it could be he'd knocked over. But in that moment of silence, when both of us had hushed our talk for the instant, the thrush's song rang out, clear as a glass bell struck with a silver spoon. The old man paused as he stooped reaching out for the handle of the shovel. "Well, and what d'you think to that?" He meant the thrush's song. Looking up at me, he pointed to the corner of a stone-tiled roof. "And there's bin a sparrer goin' in and out yon place all day with duck's feathers in 'is beak. Can't be 'cos 'tis nesting! More like 'e's savin' 'em up for later on. At least that's what I've bin thinking."

And another thing about that old bricklayer, believe it or not. He's got it into his head that it's a matter of some consequence that we should all know what the closing quotation for sterling was on the New York Stock Market the afternoon before. He always tells us the latest rate. And a better workman there couldn't be. The morning after the announcement was out about the 50 per cent. tariff, I overheard him tell a mate, "They're lettun us 'ave it properly." Faced with uncertainties, it's an easy matter to fancy that the man "on the road" has little to lose, and so little to bother about. One's idea of a lucky man, maybe?

A passing tinker and cutler—an authentic sort of journeyman—got me thinking in an off moment, “Here’s a man who’s found both a living and life.” Not that I really believe so, for the man who keeps the world going, or the woman either, is the one who stays “put” in a useful occupation, such as farming or brick-laying. But the nomad stirs in most of us at some time or other. One of the vaguest wishes most frequently expressed is the wish “to travel”—too often only an unrest that haunts the toy-cupboards of our heart’s nursery, played with on the dull days that come to all of us. One of the dearest men I knew went, in his youth, to Valparaiso and back on a sailing craft, a year’s trip in those days. Within a week of his return, a much-honoured father summoned him to take his dead brother’s place at a drapery counter. The growing business was the father’s pride. Loyal to a degree, the son made a secret vow that he would stick to the counter for just so long as the father lived. Not a day longer. Then he “would travel.” The son was an old man himself ere the father was in his grave. In fact he lived but a few years after him.

And when the son’s will was read, his savings were scattered as widely as his wishes had been. A Texas oil-field had a little bit, a Hungarian railway about the same, as well as a queer sort of Australian bank. We have laid him in a country churchyard almost within sight of the sea down which he must have longed to sail time and again. Few, if any, had guessed his secrets, too whimsical to share. Our deepest broodings are like gossamer. Most of us keep our treasures locked away, perhaps because, after all, we feel they’d lose

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their qualities once the curious questioned their worth with us.

A distinguished Sussex woman died last week, leaving directions that she should be buried in the grave of her only son, Basil, who died forty years ago at the age of five. She asked that "the little parcel containing his worn shoes and gloves be placed as near over my heart as possible, and buried with me."

I'm not so sure but that when we really do set ourselves to build a better world than the one we know, it will be done because, all other reasons having failed, we want a world good enough for the children to grow up in. Everybody's children!



ENGLISH gardens hold out to the last. In some of them the flowers never seem to die. I'm not so much a gardener as a farmer. And there is that difference. But to walk round a garden in November after a savage wind has worked out its nasty humour, and the tail-end of the spiteful rain can even yet be seen simpering along the edge of the hills, and find a cluster of rosebuds nodding a friendly greeting from their corner in spite of it all, makes one glad that one has a garden to walk in.

My "den" stands by itself in the garden. One window looks out over a pond with the old oak tree bending over it. Another looks out over a bed of winter greens and broccoli. That sight suits the farmer in me. I admit their untidiness, but approve their utility. A hedge between and another window gets a peep of marigolds, young rambler roses waiting to be tied up, and a dozen other evidences that a woman who has a busy time

in the house hasn't as much time for her garden as she would like.

Guarding the door is an apple tree. At the foot of the three steps up to it is a rhododendron. That rhododendron is not happy about something or other. It just doesn't grow. Or perhaps it grows a little, but it doesn't flourish. And there's no doubt that in some way or other I am responsible for its crabbed look, but not being gardener enough, I do nothing but reprove myself for my ignorance the times a day I pass such a stunted bush, pitying it. Yet at the height of the storm last week I counted five fat buds on those puny branches, and clapped my hands at the plant's bravery, promising it better times for such a display of fine courage.

It's the same in the lanes. There are primroses to be found at the foot of the stiles. And at any time the children could pick you a bunch of blue violets. They know where these are, as well as daisy and buttercup. Yet one would rather flowers didn't bloom so out of their season, much as they mean to us mortals. Winter will make them pay in the end for doing so. They should come with the rest, when the lambs are about, and the birds are thinking about nesting again. Already in Dorset shepherds will be getting the folds ready for the early lambing ewes. Many a lamb will be born in the South Country well before Christmas.

That is the demand from the shop and the table as the sheep farmer has learned it in recent years, and he has laid his plans to meet it. Only thus can he keep his place in the market, getting there with his early fat lambs well before New Zealand reaches it with her prime qualities of lamb, even now picking over that

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genial country's summer grasses. Round us the few breeding flocks show their first signs of pregnancy. Walking between them while they snip their plain fare in the pastures, the skilled observer notes the changes in the ewes. In some cases the farm cart comes daily to their grazing ground, leaving a supplementary trail of white turnips or kale in its track. And even to the stranger something increasingly maternal in the look about the old ewes' faces intimates as much as the more casual farmer has noted.

Over the hedge are a few troughs, out of which last season's lambs greedily snatch at the concentrated food which puts the finish on their backs and rumps that the butcher feels for. Their mothers may be those grazing so near by, but all sense of kinship has long since faded. And the same is true of the rest of the farm stock. How completely they forget the teat or the nest once that stage is passed. Hens scrap with their own pullets over a bright feed of corn. The man on the common will wring the necks of a fine squad of young geese that a few months earlier would have been defended dangerously by a sissing band of matrons headed by the gander. Turkeys, now entering the last stages of their festival preparations, will be plucked and drawn in the end without a tear shed by their farmyard companions, who will be only affrighted on their own account when the selections are made.

Nature stands by with folded arms. Once creature and man have taken matters into their own hands, she takes no count of them. She keeps to her own sphere. She is not easy to understand.



FIELD birds are disconsolate for want of water. Thrushes mope at the edges of frozen ponds, their chest feathers all ruffled and their shoulders hunched. They hang about in the faint hope that the midday sun may be strong enough to melt a few drops of pity out of winter's hard-heartedness. But there's no pity in this beastly wind. A mile away a little stream still trickles or the woodpecker and the plover would be hard put to it. There's this to be said for the birds—there is no thought of to-morrow in their heads. They lay up no stores of either food or drink, though if the worst comes to the worst they have an idea that human beings are a shade more provident. They flutter first around the chicken-houses and the barns. The pig-troughs are pecked clean from end to end. Then, as the bigger birds assert their priorities, the smaller ones take to the window-ledges of the house. They soon learn where the kitchen lies, and keep its door well within eye-shot.

It takes a lot for a rook to swallow its pride. The sheep-troughs are as near as he likes to be brought to the beggars' shamelessness. Sparrows just laugh at his pomposities. A dozen will fly up into his face and drive him off. As for starlings, an empty stomach only stimulates their precociousness. Even the jays take on a more contrite air. Still, if it were not for the berries on the hedges, the birds couldn't hold out for long against the siege that a week or two's frost amounts to for them.

Some types of birds seem more helpless than others in such times of emergency. The robin is one. This wee chap pipes a most melancholy "cheep" if things aren't going too well for him. His trouble is that it's an unwritten law in the robins' world that once the boundaries

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of their narrow kingdom are defined, a robin must be content with his lot. For better or worse that's his pitch, so that no idea of trespassing into another's territory ever seems to enter the redbreast's noddle.

A pair, at most, share pot-luck within the limits set for them. It goes hard with them when the times are as out of joint as now. But no bird gives such gentle but obvious indications of gratitude as the robin for crumbs and a tin of water put where he can find it.

It used to be that the poultry farmer was content to hatch the chickens off from February onwards. This meant that by the time the birds were able to look after themselves, spring airs and growth left the poultryman little to worry about. But a good many have changed all that. A few even hatch out the year round. But most fill up the incubator trays with eggs and get the lamps going about now. A lot are their busiest round Christmas-time. I feel sorry for them. Hatching-off chickens is one constant anxiety. It's doubtful if a December-hatched pullet comes into "lay" any earlier than a February one. Then why bother so early in the season? Partly to make fuller, more extended use of one's incubator plant, a back-wash of the rationalisation idea. But more because there's an increasing demand for young table poultry. Tastes, like fashions, change. A ten-weeks-old bird can make a pleasant meal for you and a guest, if you live in a modern flat.

The same sort of thing is happening with sheep. Not so long ago March was quite early enough for "lambing-down" for most shepherds. The ewe mother could then expect to find an increasing picking of young grass to send up the milk-flow with the body weight of the

lambs, single or twins. Now it's a common enough sight, even as far north as Yorkshire and the lower slopes in Wales, to come across flocks and their folds with lambs already sturdy on their feet. One can be sure such early lambs are doomed to catch a fancy trade. There are a few weeks early in the year when lambs fit for the butcher are scarce. Even the "new season's" overseas lamb from New Zealand hasn't arrived, and it'll be June before the home-bred March-born lambs are ready, at the earliest.

So there are farmers who step in to snatch a premium price for the tasty joint that jaded appetites in February are only too ready to pay. There are critics, and plenty, of this tendency to speed-up the ways of the farm. Most of the old hands were a bit shocked when they took a look round the Smithfield Show in London last week. "Baby" beef is all the rage. In the old days a bullock roamed the fields and hillsides for the first three years of its life, growing plenty of bone and a frame for the fattener to work his finishing arts on. But no housewife wants bone these days, and neither money nor ovens will run to the joints that used to last some of our forebears a week. The same thing is happening with the glasshouse men. Market gardening shows better profits for a winter crop stimulated to maturity with electric coils. Even the dairy farmer aims to make more winter milk.

Time was when farming followed the seasons. Now it has to keep its eye on the shops. Perhaps it wouldn't do for everyone to swing-over so drastically, nor is it clear yet how much of this speeding-up farm creatures will put up with. Already there are poultry-keepers who are using their incubators for the table birds, but they

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have gone back to the old-fashioned broody hen and coop for their breeding flock.

What it all comes to is that while farmers must go about their business relying more upon their heads than their habits, theirs will always be a peculiar occupation. Nature and Mother Earth are a combination that defy the estimates and entries of too strict an accountancy.



“COME on in, m’ dear, and close that door behind ’ee, and quick. ’Tis enough to cut a body in half. Shouldn’t be the least bit surprised an’ us don’t get a fall o’ snow after this lot.”

I’d put a neighbour “down” at her brother’s place. She’d set out to walk a couple of miles to the cross-roads for the bus, after a Saturday shopping expedition. No sooner had her hand—kid-gloved I noticed; how careful most women are about their gloves!—clicked the latch of the little gate than the cottage door was opened and as buxom a party was holding a lamp shoulder high, and pouring out a welcome into the early darkness. “You’m a bit afore y’ time, aren’t yo? Someone given ’ee a lift! Well, that was very good ov——” and the voices faded behind the door as it was slammed to shut out the wind.

Through the window the room looked cosy. Leaping flames in the fire-grate sent their flickers dancing over its walls. And, as I drove away up a short stretch of hill, I could hear the murmur of two women’s voices tumbling together like a cataract over broken bits of the week’s news. I’ll warrant they said nothing about Persian oil,

or even Parliament. Each was a mother to a boy, and their children would figure in the talk.

Jobs for them were a constant source of anxiety, neither of them being keen about farmwork if there was anything doing in the building line. But building was slack. Brickyards were still "kep' closed and the frosts had put a stop to the clay-diggin'." All this I'd been told coming along the road, so it was not hard to guess what was being talked about inside.

Round a bend, and a gipsy whistled a whippet out of my way. I'd noticed the camp earlier in the day. Now it looked as cosy as the cottage in spite of it being December out of doors. A thorn hedge high on a bank to the windward, beds of brown bracken for couches and a half-dozen big trees within a stone's throw, with more dead branches on them than one likes to see. The gipsies were making the most of the site. And I knew what they knew, and better perhaps. The wood behind them had a deal more rabbits in it than it could provide for. As soon as the moon was up they'd be hopping across that road, in their ones and twos, to their jungle of marrow-stem kale opposite. I knew what the whippet was for.

"Twang" went a chord in me. No man sees a camp-fire on a dark night without wishing he hadn't so much on his shoulders. Man gave up a lot when he let the women fasten him down to streets and houses with names and numbers to them. And I don't mean that unkindly. A man likes to sit over a fire. He always did; he does now. But the women preferred a wall round it and a roof over it and he let them have their way. They were thinking of the children. This bunch of gipsies

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had gone one better than any others I'd seen before. Tied by a leg to a couple of cart-wheels, six or seven hens pecked for grit and "vitamins" with as much contentment as in any run. A gipsy may have to move at any moment, and a hen isn't an easy thing to lay one's hand on at too short notice.

Like a pig out of bounds, once let them think you're wanting them to go to any particular spot they don't fancy themselves, and it becomes the one spot within a hundred miles they fight shy of. In a near-by wood we keep three in-pig sows. There is a shed in the wood and a water-hole; they quite evidently prefer this to a sty and yard.

Trees have a knack of evening out the temperature. A keen wind loses its bite by the time it can get to the middle of a wood. But one of the sows is now within a week of farrowing. I thought she'd be better nearer home as well as away from the possible curiosity of one of her companions in that event. We fitted up a warm corner of a barn, provided extra victuals and spread out invitation before milady. But she preferred the wood. Time and again she found her way back to it. During the height of the excitement, and it can be exciting once a sow's snout gets under a door or fence, old Martin Tanner put his cheery face over the gate, taking a good laugh at our predicament. Fortunately, one doesn't have to explain things to such an old countryman. His aid made the difference, and Susan now snores just where we wanted her. And there's no complaint.



A NOTED firm of pocket-diary publishers informed me, by advertisement, that a "Farmer's Diary for 1935" could be bought at any of the principal booksellers'. This led to my spending a drollish half-hour last week going the round of a few such shops in the heart of London.

The first I entered hopefully. From the front door onwards it held out a thousand hands of welcoming diaries. Stacks of them. I never doubted this was a "principal bookseller" right enough. What I took to be a favourable portent was the encouraging and confident air of the assistant moving towards me. For just a moment a mischievous impulse stirred in me, to ask for something much more improbable, say a green-grocer's diary or an explorer's, to test out the range of modern diary production. But I gave the impulse a mild spank and suppressed it, keeping the face of "strictly business." So almost modestly, but quite expectantly, I simply asked for so-and-so's "Farmer's Diary." I haven't seen a young lady look so abashed, and even hurt, for many a day!

It dawned on me that yet once again I was set upon the unending quest. I'd been on this errand in other years, though not in London, and have had to decide in the end to wait for the luck of a Christmas gift. This has always meant getting and keeping a diary much like other diaries. I've always been as curious as the most unsophisticated townsman could ever be to see and possess a downright "farmer's pocket-book diary."

But that girl looked at me as one who, having read the newspapers of late, however casually, thought

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that I was clear proof that the country had really gone farming mad. What with the London evening papers head-lining "milk-gluts," and then "milk-droughts," "Home wheat Quotas," followed impetuously by "Dominion wheat Quotas," horticultural anti-dumping duties, deputations, from rhubarb-growers upwards, millers' "yeas" and "nays," and, above all, Mr. Walter Elliot, she had reason enough. This distinguished gentleman must be second only in importance to the Prime Minister by this time, in the public mind, judging by the Press! I saw all this in the slight suggestion of disappointed annoyance in the sprightly assistant's abrupt negative.

I went out from that shop a trifle ashamed for being so gauche. I was a Londoner no more. I could feel myself walking out backwards like a discreet street-musician turned empty away, but hopeful to the last snick of the door's latch. And then that troll of an impulse within me snatched at a likelier moment to get my ear. He and I make the most of each other's company if we're agreed. So off we went together and if I saw as much as a plain post-card in a window, he would nudge me to go in and ask for a so-and-so's "Farmer's Pocket Diary," which I did, only to come as promptly out again, aware of mild flutters behind the counter.

I can't be sure if that's what Messrs. X's advertisement meant me to do, or if my doing did them any good. But I had my reward, or so I took it to be. Within two days of my bookshop escapades, a friend sent along a "Collins' Farm Pocket Diary."

I nurse a theory that farmers alone can detect the

farmer authentic, when they meet one, "from the moment he opens his mouth." You are a farmer without the slightest doubt, with or without a spade's depth of soil to work on, if you can read with natural zest a "table showing the composition, manurial and compensation values of cattle feeding-stuffs." Or "How to Control Pests," "Estimate the Contents of Stacks and Silos," as well as "Measurements for Setting-out Plants or Trees to the Acre." I confess that a pocket diary with such information bulging its covers from one end to the other fascinates me.

Harry Hooker, a wise man who counts himself well out of the farming business, has as keen a sense of humour as most of us. I told him my diary story. He, too, sees something funny about the way "the whole country seems taken up wi' farmin'. Let's hope they'll make haste and get on and do summat. Maybe there's a future for pigs." Queer how a notion like that finds its way into the minds of the farming community. Pigs, fit now for bacon or pork, are selling as badly as ever. Yet breeding stock, young sows and gilts, sell better every day. Still, as one talks over the look of things, "Let's get Christmas over" is more the attitude. "We'll know better after a while." And there's something in that.

This time next week or thereabouts the children will be breaking off sprigs of holly from a radiant bush not many yards from our front door. And there's mistletoe, a rare bunch of it, growing out of the old apple tree in one's own garden. We'll pluck a little of that too.



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BOXING-DAY morning was one of the loveliest of the year. Its sun-rising was a frolic, chasing the night's mists helter-skelter up the hillsides and then over. These clung a bit sulkily to the more prominent peaks, but such a gay-hearted sun was having none of that nonsense. She just hustled them off westward. All the same, they knew as well as she did that this was no time of year for her to be out and about showing off her prettiest silks and satins. So by noon they were back again, reinforced by a whole sky-full of sober greybeards travelling on a mischief-making west wind.

From where I was, for an hour or two I watched these airy but gloomy custodians of the fitness of things setting themselves to obliterate all traces of such unseasonable gaieties. They joined hands, they put shoulder to shoulder and then marched southward and eastward, trying to douche, as they moved along, all the glows and fires set going by the sun's ardours. But did they do what they liked with her? Not a bit of it! Over their heads and between their sprawling vapours, spreading this way and that, to smother the contagious flames of her glory, the hard-pressed sun still went on, poking through saucy glints and gleams of her retreating beauty. She would be back again another day, and with better chances, for was not the old world below already stirring after only a short winter's sleep?

From now on she was promising us to keep more and more north of the equatorial line, and make a longer stay with much the greater half of dear old Mother Earth's awakening domain.

Christmas Day had provided a richer feast of friend-

ships' remembrances than ever before. My imagination leaned over the parapet of one of Time's oldest bridges. The ripples of clear water coming down the stream, kept going by some everlasting springs at the foot of the Downs, could spare not a moment for me. They were all eagerness to get on their own way. Stream-bed and banks set them a clear direction. They ran on, all to the same merry but monotonous tune.

Away in the distance I could hear a group of children making games out of the themes of their story-books. "Father Christmas" had left a whole new company of companions for them to get to know and romp with. Already they were on the best of terms with "Mr. Toad" and his vainglorious exploits, and were re-enacting some of these around the edges of a pond. Two of the group, and their voices sounded the shrillest to my critical ears, had seen the play in London. Back home again, the book, *The Wind in the Willows*, was taken down from a "favourites" shelf to be re-read in the light of the transfiguring stage. And I have to confess that it has become almost as hard for me to disbelieve in the activities of "Ratty" and "Moley" as being at any time other than virtuous. All three of us broke off a most animated conversation on the instant when, crossing a lawn the other morning, we almost stumbled through a tell-tale mound of fresh-thrown-up soil upon the grass.

"Moley!" We each thought it. That was clear. Sad to relate, I was the only one of the three who betrayed the clay feet of the mortal. But I quickly pulled them in again, though not before I had visions of a treasured garden peppered with mole-hills! Still,

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that I kept to myself. It'll not be an easy matter to take summary action against "Moley."



PLEASANT bits of "Old England" still withstand the claims and clamour of the twentieth century to an astonishing extent. Visit some villages I know, and one is back again in the reign of Queen Victoria. The very sign on the post pillar-boxes tells you so: "V. R." still stands. But big changes are on the way, even for such places.

In our own case, we've still a mile or two to walk to meet the nearest bus, but the electric pylon has come to our gate. In a couple of weeks we shall have left the tallow candle and oil-lamp era behind us, for good, we hope. For months the slow negotiations were fought out. The Victorians were fighting every inch of their retreat. Some of the land over which the wires must pass was a family estate. Obstructive refuge was taken in established rights and obsolete laws. Yet slowly the poles kept forging their way towards us along the foot of the hills! Every now and again there would be a gap; the wires had been driven underground, a costly business for the promoters, adding to the costs of the ultimate consumer. Then the poles would start up again. We could watch their progress, base our calculations on its rate, and plan out our use of "the juice" accordingly.

And now they are at our very door. We only wait for a transformer to break down the current to our domestic capacity and one more urban amenity has been added unto us. Over the way, the farm wants but

the word, and a smelly engine, with its splutters and fumes, will give place to the switch.

It won't make a deal of difference to the cows. They'll go on giving their milk down just the same to the artificial pressure of the rubber-lined cups, pulsating more rhythmically than the best of hand-milkers. Still, as a whole, things are slow-moving as yet. A friend has had reason to spend a few months recently amongst the farmers of Suffolk. He has a most melancholy story to tell. He found old men still in possession of the farms with ideas as old-fashioned as ever in their heads. He even met men who refused to grow sugar-beet, one of the few crops with money in it, because it meant breaking into a century-old system of rotation methods.

He stayed in market-towns that are as good as dead. Stowmarket, Halesworth—towns that flustered up a little to welcome the cattle-dealers on a market-day a week and then lapsed into somnolence for the rest. The young people couldn't stick it. Somehow or other they would hear of jobs farther afield and be after them.

But the new year opens more hopefully. It may bring the turn to things. Farming has its enheartening prophets. Wise heads believe it has a future. The truth is that there's not so much doubt in some of their minds about the pig, the cow and the acre as about the kind of men who'll be in charge of them when the chances for the better do come along at last. Will bad times have been lesson enough? Farmers are obstinate creatures, and mere obstinacy is no friend of the countryside. We who live there deserve as good ways and means as any other sort of folk. But we suffer so from too

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much "local" government even yet. A parish boundary is as far as a good many of our representatives care to look, late in the day as it is for feudalism. I can tell you of one parish where one man, entrenched in a limited but sufficient authority, has been able to condemn a whole community to an indifferent water supply, and children to a four-mile walk to school. And he still gets his way.

He attends church regularly enough, and cherishes a notion that he's defending his day and neighbourhood from the encroachment of a neurotic civilisation. For myself, I think much of this sort of thing will lose its hold the moment the countryman finds reason enough to believe without a doubt that the land is an asset the nation has decided to set new store by. The shackles of the past lie loose about the present's shrunken wrists. A very little hope would shake them off.

The yeast of education is leavening the cottagers' habits. The daughter teaches the mother much that she finds no difficulty in believing. The older women are more generally ready for changes than the older men. In many a case, reconciled to their own dull fate, they encourage the younger ones to get away. This is saying a lot. And yet I believe it to be true that the countrywoman is more ready to make a bid for better times, with their livelier habits, than the men-folk. And in that one must not forget the labourer's wife, be that labourer horseman or cowman, bailiff or worker. She likes getting off "to town" every whit as much as he does, "if only to make a bit of a change."



ONE or two of the mornings lately have opened up with every intimation of spring. A few showers overnight, a faint flush in the sky for a couple of hours after sunrise, and the starlings chatter in the gutterings, or tear to and fro like the mad things they are at times, with news of worms rising to the top, a rare feed in mid-winter. But it is not for long. The sky soon overcasts, a chilly air sets in. We ask each other whether it is snow we are to expect, or perhaps, more hopefully, "Shall we be getting a little more rain?" Something to talk about is rain. We gauge our good fortune by our water-butts, and a young green that freshened up the grass all in one night, so that the sheep ate at it with all the zest of a new bite.

Topsy-turvy days these. The farmer was never less sure of his ground. He starts out on the New Year less certain of his programme than ever he can remember. Neighbours shake their heads together over the milk scheme. They find plenty of fault with it, but finish up all their arguments by asking themselves where they would be without it. Pigs were ever a tricky trade, but never trickier than at the moment. A lot of men contracted to supply so many pigs each month to the bacon factories. At the time that they put their signatures to the bond, a new way of doing business for many of them, they had few or none running about their yards. They calculated that it would be simple enough to buy a batch of youngsters at some local sale. And then if the porker trade didn't jump upwards and upset such pretty calculations. The porker, half-way stage to the baconer, was making half as much again per pound, and setting such a

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premium on the price of the youngsters suitable for either trade that the man with his contracts has had to pay a deal more than has suited his pocket. So he wonders whether or not to have anything more to do with contracts, though his doubts are disturbed when he recollects that the porker's life may be a gay one but it is a short one, for no sooner is May here (the month without an "r") than the trade for porkers flops.

But it is bigger things than this that are bothering him. Somewhere at the back of his mind is the idea that the coming year will change a way of life for him that has taken its own road for a century. Soon they will be telling him what sort of bull he may run with his herd; not the creature after his own fancy, because he likes the colour of its coat or the shape of its head, but one with qualities that satisfy more expert judges of live-stock than he. Rumours grow stronger that it won't be long before he has to sell his bullocks by both weight and quality, and not by the mere whim of eye and touch.

Potatoes that he has to sell won't be sold anyhow in future, but through "authorised merchants," graded, and with no dirt in the bottom of the bags—a silly trick that greengrocers naturally made complaint about, and took good care never to pay for in the long run.

Shadows like these hang like mists of uncertainty over the opening days of a new year in farming. To a man who has run his business by his wits, to step onwards into an era of contracts and controls goes very much against the grain. He hates to set his signature on paper to undertakings that must be kept up whatever wind or weather. Yet there will be no revolt.

Evasions here and there; a sort of guerrilla warfare by grumbling and grouching that will come to little in the end. The farming man knows when he is up against the inevitable. Queer how unsympathetic the village is about the fate of the farmer. He is none too popular a figure, even with the people who do business with him. They will flock out to his shooting parties, though, and draw off a glass or two at his barrel and have a bite of bread and cheese.

There is a week or two now when they will take things easy on the land, and a motley company will set out to beat up partridge and hares out of the kales and furrows. "Sport" is a blood thirst that is easily aroused in the hangabout villager. A few yards of netting and a ferret fill out a short day with profitable entertainment. Higglers prefer rabbits with no shot in them. But it won't be long now before another season for rabbiting is done. My love of "sport" had its set-back a few seasons ago—a set-back from which it has never recovered. A Boxing Day, and I was cutting a few trusses of hay from a stack bought of a neighbour. In the distance could be heard the yappings of dogs and the excited chatterings of their human followers.

It was a grand day to be out, a clear sky and a nip in the air, and I leaned upon the hay-knife, rather envying the leisure of folk who could take time off when it pleased them. I tried to follow the trace of the scent by the barking of the dogs and the shouts of their followers. Were they making for Brown's Folly, or was it Fox's Wood? And suddenly I was aware of a slight stir in the grass at the end of the stack, and the pantings of a harried creature making a halt to get its

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wind—a hare with a pair of bulging eyes, so strained with fright that they looked like dropping out of its head. For a moment it stood upon its haunches, its ears erect, its front paws held out, looking like a miniature kangaroo, waiting for the intimations of the chase. A dog yapped, a woman's voice shrieked excitedly, and the poor creature dropped into the grass, quivering from face whiskers to the tip of its tail in a sweating agony of dread.

Somehow I hated the whole business from that moment. So often the quarry is never seen until the dogs have done with it. There is just the fun of clambering over hedges, getting pulled out of ditches in a jolly company of people who are merely out for the fun of a cross-country jaunt with a wind-up of hospitality. I saw the whole business from the point of view of the hare that morning. I have had to get my cross-country fun in other ways since then.



ABOUT my best treat lately was a fireside talk with a retired village schoolmaster. His granddaughter has been placed, but not by him, at one of the most distinctive modern schools in the land, where alarums about sex matters and juvenile experiments in tobacco never reckon to be sounded. Every now and again, as he listened to the tale of the child's first term, he scratched dubiously at a small clump of whisker under the centre of his lower lip. Kindly blue eyes, as zestful still as a youth's, peered at a company threshing out educational conundrums. Slightly deaf, his head was tilted a little to take it all in.

At that stage he'd nothing much to say. The discussion jumped from one side of the room to the other, but he let a lot of it pass over his head. He must have struck fifty matches in that hour. But the fact that his pipe yielded only about three puffs per strike never seemed to annoy him. A non-smoker myself, I presumed he and that particular pipe understood each other very well. No anti-nicotine zealot, however fanatical, could ever have the heart to part these two, I thought. . . . By and by he and I drew ourselves out of the stream of the discussion. The women carried on. He talked of his work as a rural district councillor and the chance it gave him, as one of the few firm-minded minds on it, to get cottage schemes through.

"Once you knew what you wanted, you could play up the reactionary element much like a cat with a mouse. And especially as one or two of the others have been through my hands in their schooldays. I can usually get 'em to back me up when I want 'em to." So it was that the unemployed of the area, when their turn came to go before the public assistance committee, were met as generously as the provisions allowed. Old schoolboys sat at his elbow. And whenever another old schoolboy came along with his story of misfortune, the old schoolmaster took a hand. He saw to it that when playmates were looking into each other's eyes, with life's luck only between them, they played a certain game of cricket all over again or talked of the same girl who neither of them married in the end. "Let's see, who's she married to now?" The old schoolmaster could always tell them.

At ten minutes to ten on every week-night of the year,

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he turns into the village "pub." His wife still holds it as a slightly distasteful practice on his part. But if any seeker for his advice or help has found him "out" during the day when they called, they can find him now. Every soul in the place, from forty-six years downwards, has grown up under those blue eyes. His daughters declare he has always wanted to go to sea. As far as I know, he has stayed pretty much where he is now most of the time. Once in a while he wends his way in and around the borders of Kent, where he was born. Then back home again to talk black currants and sugar-beet with his smallholder neighbours in Norfolk.

These formed a society to sell their fruit on better terms in the markets and to the jam factories. They made the old schoolmaster their secretary unpaid. It was probably his idea in the first place. Last season their raspberries and black currants "made not far short of just twice the price of the year before. For one thing, there wasn't the fruit about." That was his explanation. But I gave him credit for most of it in my mind.

As for teaching "sex" in school. "We're born with most of those difficulties already well planted in us. Our battles are staged for us from the start. And I've seen enough men and women grow right up to come to believe that children learn as much of those matters from their parents as from anywhere else." It sounded old-fashioned, but he meant more. "A parent hides few secrets from the child. In the end they guess most things about us and face up to their own conflicts in another way, with much the same material to fight with.

Better aid can come from the parent than the teacher at this stage. With most parents, one or other of 'em usually knows well enough just where he's been beaten. And there are some things we owe to our children." He seemed to be dealing with himself.

"Married women should be kept on in the schools. It was a pity my own wife gave up when she did."

"What's that?" flashed out from the other side of the room. "Were you saying something about me?" A shaft of light lit up the shape of an old controversy for a moment. The daughters rushed in to smother it, and we got on to other things. The quality of the countryside is the character its weather and ways build up in so many of the men and women who stand closest to its interests. The same sort of thing comes out in fisher-folk. Ordinary folk, some might think, yet in their wrinkled age they are transfigured by a beauty of countenance wrung out of a bluff experience. And of such is my schoolmaster friend.



ON the last day of the year four hikers passed our house, evidently making for "The Downs." Two wore Oxford "bags," the others normal grey flannels. One had a pipe going. But not one of them wore a top-coat. One's eyes lit up at such unseasonable sanity. And what a tribute to an English winter! A little rain in the night some time had softened the top of the chalky road. Their thick shoes had a few splashings of mud about them. But what mattered that? It might easily be so again in June! I watched their broad backs until they had crossed over the old

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brick bridge at the bottom of the hill and rounded the corner the other side of it. Once, the stem of the pipe was held out, pointing towards a thorn-bush by the wayside. A thrush was trying out a few bars of a new song. The talk stopped for a moment or two, though the men kept up their walking.

The thrush had been trying her new trilling over for a couple of hours or more, first from a bush on one side of the road and then from the top of the hedge on the other. The budding songster—I had an idea that spring would be her first concert season—had taken scant notice of my going to and fro on the jobs of a farm-yard. She was used to me by this time. But as soon as she became aware of the strangers, she faltered, took a flying leap for a more distant, substantial oak, and then had to start tuning-up all over again. So they missed the best part of her rehearsing. But they heard enough of her to make one of them exclaim on behalf of the rest, "What a morning!" And as those broad backs rounded the corner, every swing and stride proclaimed it—"What a morning!"

We've a friend staying in the house who extends the joy of every walk the children take with her by a real knowledge of the local birds' habits and each plant's flowers. This means that tea-table talk for such small people covers a wide field. Rooks and rabbits fit as naturally into their scheme of things as toast and marmalade. Playmates include the creatures one meets on a country walk. Jane's utmost delight, at the moment, anyway, is a "ride on cow back." That impulse assuaged, the two-year-old's next instruction is to "look for lu-lu eggs." How a batch of perfectly

straightforward all-over-white Leghorn hens came to be known to her as "lu-lu's" puzzled our wits for a while. But she explained herself. Submitting to a stripping at maternal hands, and affecting to be shocked at such a sorry state of shoes, Jane put up the defence that the "cockalulus" were more or less responsible.

As a matter of fact, every spare moment of her out-of-door existence is taken up just now with a trotting inspection of the piglet family in the barn, a pair of calves who greet her overtures with licks that tickle, "lu-lu's," and a chat with a Guernsey cow, whose milk has had as much to do with Jane's present rather terrifying robustness as anything. For the first few important months of her first year, Jane put on no weight—a matter of some alarm to her parents. Friends—some mothers of shining examples of the efficacy of this "patent" baby food or the other—bewildered us with their concern and recipes. We tried some of them, but babes are evidently individual affairs. There was no marked headway. Then, having no cows of our own at the time, I attended a farm sale and took a fancy to a certain cow, thinking of the thin sickly Jane at home. "Easy to handle, and gi'es a drop o' tip-top milk," recommended the owner. Jo', short for Josephine, turned out better than the man's word. And now Jane and Jo' enjoy to the full the rites of their mystic relationship. At least, Jane does. Seated confidently on the cow's back as she stands in the stall, the child's merry laugh echoes round the rafters of the barn every time the golden creature lurches forward to pick out a fresh munch of hay from the pile in front of her broad muzzle.

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I motored through Tooting on New Year's Eve. We'd been Hammersmith way to a children's party. The drowsy remnants of it sat up in their seats to drink in a little of the thrust and glamour of the crowded pavements on either side of us. By the time we were home, the promise of the hikers' morning had broken up into a gale that brought the New Year in with a lion-like roar. It fell smack on to our windows. But the children slept through the lot of it "like tops." And did they ask about Tooting and its glare when they awoke? Not a bit of it. They fell to making plans, Sunday morning though it was, for a tent out in the garden; "and you, Barbara, must be a mouse trying to get in."

Times a day one thanks God that the world of unrest the adult to-day knows all too much about goes over their heads so. And it's easier done here than in a town. That's partly why one prefers the country for children to grow up in.



ONE and another keep telling me that it won't be long before our bit of country hereabouts will be "opened up." The phrase sounds disturbing. One can only guess at what is in their minds. This "opening up" business is going on a bare three miles away. At least if that's the sort of thing they mean.

Looking south from my windows, things cannot have altered much in a hundred years, at least until a few months back. It's true the railway has been there for a generation or so. And I don't know when it was that

they put up the two or three telegraph poles that stand out on the ridge of the Downs like three crucifixes on the distant skyline, but otherwise life in our parish still moves as sluggishly as a backwater in a summer stream. No shop, a couple of post letter boxes, the little school closed down, the wee church with a couple of bells, quite sufficient for the dozen or so devout souls who pay any heed to them, and a rutty lane that floods almost every time there is a rainstorm. It's flooded now. Ten farms and a sandpit give most of the folk their jobs. And if you meet a neighbour on his way, as likely as not it will be either only to the bus or to the Barn Concert.

Once a week, or perhaps twice, the farmers among us turn out for market, seven miles either way of us. There's not much coming or going otherwise, apart from the tradesmen's vans. We've been brought into their orbit. A ridge to the north shuts out an encroaching new world. We go on day by day as though the threat was not there. All the same, brick by brick, villa by villa, the enterprise which is to "open up" creeps nearer. A village near by has already succumbed. They talk of lighting the length of its street at night with half a dozen points of electricity, and the long-drawn-out wrangle for water, settled at last, can only mean that the place will double its size in the next few years.

Two miles cross-country the other way, and a straggle of variations in architectural disharmony can be seen reaching out menacing paws towards a piece of gorse common, jewelled with a harp-like pond near enough to its heart. Let's make no mistake—the houses are

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wanted for their occupiers. But that's no reason for approving such a sprawl, almost as offensive to look upon as litter thrown down by the careless, along first one side and then the other of country lanes that were built for ambling market carts, with the high trees hanging over for lovers and neighbours to gossip under. Anyhow, by "opening up" I suppose they mean we must expect something of the same sort when our time comes. Well, it will drive a few of us out. But we shall miss watching the ploughman turning his spring furrows over for oats and roots, the sheep being folded along the foot of the hills, and the blare of the cow wanting to turn back to suckle the calf left behind in the yards.

The same folk tell me that the men who have made quick fortunes at buying and selling land near the coast for Garden Cities, so called, have now got their eye on our stretch of country. Its wooded ridges and wide views and presently electrified railway, following the line of the valley, have caught the fancy of the speculative building expert. So it is to be our turn next to give way to the clang and clatter of the trowel and cement mixer. It may not be for five years, but it is coming all the same. That's what they say.

Of course they will be ready to pay a fair price for the land they want. Folk who own farms that these men fancy may make a better deal that way than selling pigs and poultry, milk and mutton. Yet one wonders what will be done with the several bits of woodland dotted about, and will the brook in the bottom get filled up with broken bottles and tins, or will someone have the sense to convert its twists and turns into swimming pools and ponds for children to dabble in?

Twelve months ago a small town, only five miles away, was still asleep. Already its best corners have been seized by the biggest banks, sites have been cleared for three of the largest chain-shop concerns in the country to erect emporiums upon, and the plans for a "Super" Cinema have met with the approval of the local Council, beginning to stir with the prospect of such greatness being thrust upon them.

We're still two miles from the nearest bus, and nearly four, if you walk it in the winter, from a couple of lamp-lit stations. Take a wrong turning at the cross-roads and you would never find us.

But "nigh and nigh draws the chase."

We country-lovers will soon have to make up our minds how much longer we can hold out, or how much farther afield we shall have to go. It's a sort of guerrilla war between two sets of ideas of life, with the town mind getting the uppermost, in our part, anyway.

One day there will be a compromise. Instead of us each fighting the other single-handed, baited and tempted by the mere price per yard of our land, we will take the issue right out of the hands of the land speculator and settle the lay-out of hills and valleys, woods and streams before they lay their axes into the butts of our trees, or turn our beauty-spots into mere bargain sites. Some sort of a start has been made. We got a notice the other day that this out-of-the-way parish had been scheduled for town-planning, and any who wished could be notified of any developments likely to affect them. But it is not a very earnest endeavour as yet. Plans get rushed through long before the Rural Council realises who or what is at the back of the latest move.

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All the same, it's a happy thing that folk tired of streets and a mere number over their door-knockers should be wanting to make a move more towards the country. As for the countryman, perhaps more than the shake-up such changes bring, he needs the fresh contacts they mean.



THE countryside is in siege. On the blacksmith's shop, on the parapet of every rustic bridge, hanging in the post-offices of the villages in a dozen counties around us, the police have plastered red and black notices, "Foot and Mouth Disease : No Movement."

Our nerves are on edge. A cow sneezes in the stall, once, twice, or stumbles clumsily on the rough path going towards the pond, and an uneasy mind wonders whether to let the police know or not. One neighbour did. A pig was out-of-sorts. I'm not sure if the creature wasn't shamming. Pigs have their sense of humour. Anyhow, that stomach-ache, for in this case it came to no more than that, caused a lot of pother. Everything and everybody was soused in disinfectant. The dairy-herd, dainty and obstreperous alike, had to open their mouths twice a day and say "aa," the sheep were put under guard, and generally most people connected with the place went about looking rather ashamed of themselves. But the pig made a most glorious recovery. In fact, in less than twenty-four hours its tail had an extra curl in it, and solemn faces relaxed just a little.

Still, they had more grounds than most for concern.

Three years ago, on the same farm, over a hundred graded, tuberculin-tested milking cows had been dragged out one by one by the neck, down the same chalky road which led to their green pastures, a pistol having first been fired at close range between each pair of wondrous eyes, such as a cow has. One creature had a few sores round its gums. It had not eaten its winter breakfast. Suspect already because of the proximity of a fully infected farm, the vet. had no option but to don the black cap, and twelve years of patient selection and careful breeding were "knocked on the head," all too literally, in a couple of hours that tragic morning.

The soft, warm carcasses were dragged to pits torn out of turf still dented with their yesterday's hoof-marks, and there tossed on to a heap of broken boughs and coal. They told me that the man who had bred them had to be led away from the scene, with the tears streaming between his fingers, and great sobs wrenching the broad shoulders. No mere money-raker, this man. I knew as much about him. Every cow had a name which he'd given them. And if he'd had a thousand 'twould have been just the same with him. "Born amongst cows, he were." It was the foreman's explanation. Farming folk understood.

The smell of those funeral pyres, drifting a couple of miles on the south-west wind, hung about our chimney-tops for more than a week after. We could not shake off the sense of bereavement. The evil thing never fell upon me, but it hit some of our best neighbours full in the face at that time. They got the price for the carcasses, it's true. One or two a little more,

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as they do now in special circumstances. But even with the toughest of these men, compensation might be what you cared to make it, and still the wound would take a deal of healing over.

There are things happening to cattle on most farms to-day which lose a man more money, month in and month out, than a smash-up from "foot-and-mouth." Abortion among cows is rampant. "Slipping" their calves as the cattlemen say. There can't be many stockmen left in the country who haven't met this nightmare of the cowsheds in their time. Surprisingly few, however, have found themselves involved in "foot-and-mouth." Markets get shut in their face on account of it. It flits mysteriously from district to district, and for the man whose fields harbour it, the blow is a big one.

It's the drama of the thing that gets hold of us, even the countryman. Old hands still smile down their sleeves about "foot-and-mouth." "When I was a lad along o' me father, we could allus cure 'em then, and did." They'll tell you so now in every market-place distraught by the present regulations. Yet, as outbreak follows outbreak, reported over the wireless and followed up the next morning with details furbished in the Press, the veterinary activities become a battle-line. The roof is lifted off the laboratories of the scientist. We see him grabbing up a few test tubes of serum in his haste to be off to the latest scene of enemy attack. An aeroplane, and a little later he is in the firing-line, a quiet farmstead down some muddy side lane in Berkshire. At one of the farmhouse outposts he visits, the woman there is getting on with the dinner

for to-morrow. She's feathering a duck. But at any rate she's taken one precaution. She's got the dog tied up. Otherwise life goes on much the same.



“YOU must bring your cross-cut with you in the morning, Jim. While the frost holds let's have a go at the timber lying about from the last gale.” Jim's step crunched the evening road home long before the words were through. He comprehended, with no other comment than an “All right, sir.” He had two miles to go! At sixty, Jim is not long over a serious abdominal operation. But he wanted to be at work again. “A chap of my sort do'ant want to be a-sittin' about indoors getting in the missus's road,” was how he put it. But he has the incomparable knack of the true countryman for “easing work.” You know your man the moment you see him touch a hoe, tie a faggot, or sharpen a swop-hook for the hedges.

Baynards had their barn roof stripped off by the same gale. We had two of a row of elms blown down. One missed the house by the merest chance, some of its outer branches pressing their twigs against the window-panes as though to rub in how near a thing it was. The other smashed across a shed that must have stood unspoilt since Elizabethan times till then.

There's little timber price to elm. We had the others “topped,” feeling no peace till this was done. But brittle elm makes a risky job, so the timber hauliers asked £4 a tree to do it, the already fallen trunks to be “chucked in.” “They're only fit for a few more coffin

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boards," a callous foreman grunted indifferently. We kept "the tops" for firing, though oak is much the better wood for this.

Oak is a joy to handle. There's nothing treacherous about oak. It just gets old and must come down to make room for younger stuff. Or a certain caterpillar pest eats off its leaves so that the limbs die. On a day when there's "nowt much else to do," four-foot lengths of oak will split from top to toe under a sledge-hammer and a wedge. But for the knots, junction of trunk and stem, the slower, more tedious saw is the only tool. Even the axe won't face these.

"It makes yo' warm gotten of it and keeps yo' warm when you've got it," chuckled the facetious carter, George, heaving an awkward stump into the tumbril, followed by a cautionary "whoa there, lass" to the horse just as the obstinate log was about to bump the bottom of the cart. George is one of those men who conveniently believe in "leaving the family for the missus to look after." He gives her "so much," keeping enough for himself and a pint. A military coat, the buttons carefully removed, made for a man twice his build, and a pair of full-seated riding-breeches have been his seven-day-week outfit for a year or two now. But he keeps his job, looks after his horses, handles a plough and can build a stack as good as the next. Sunday morning usually finds him routing around the hedge-bottoms accompanied by a dog of doubtful breed, but with enough spaniel about its nose to suggest utility. Yet who has much up against George?

Besides, when you've helped such a man once in a while over a brute of a stile near by, on his Saturday

night way home from "The Hop Pole"—well, a sort of understanding grows up between you that's by no means unfriendly. For may not such a Saturday night now and then in a dull life prove in the end but a mote in that brother's eye? I sometimes think so, knowing something of his slender chances.

But George is of little use as a wood-cutter. To me, of all the servitors green nature has, the authentic woodman stands out peer. Just now, before the sap rises again, bundles of pea-boughs, bean-sticks, poles and faggots mark his progress through the woodlands in readiness for the coming season's gardening folk. Like the thatcher, the woodcutter is a disappearing race, taking work at a price rather than work for wages. Columns of smoke indicate his tidy ways, keeping his work before him, clearing the waste up as he goes.

To enter a deep wood, one's feet rustling up layers of several autumns' leaves, down a long aisle of overhanging trees, and to find at the heart of it all a reflective, independent man of working skill, is to have my mind filled with the notion that here before me stands a God's priest indeed; and that climbing smoke the heaven-going symbol of a true altar's fire. To linger in the heart of even a small wood brings me as profound a sense of sanctuary as any other holy place I can think of.



IT'S time to keep a look-out for snowdrops again, to me as delicious a surety that the year is indeed a new one as there is to be found anywhere the wide world over. Green shoots are thrusting their spear-like heads

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up through the bottom of hedges with a certainty that cannot be denied. You could point to primroses and violets in November. But they peeped out from their sheltered nooks then with all the diffidence of an interloper, ready to be chased away by the first bitter tongue that really set about them for their impudence.

When the snowdrop comes, however, the wind may blow as tartly as it cares. This dainty evidence that Mother Earth is really stirring from her winter sleep will only set its modest, drooping head the more firmly on a collar of most fashionable green. The snowdrop trips over the threshold of the year with all the fragile graciousness of a high-born lady. To me she is the Pavlova of flowers, round which will gather later a jostling crowd of crocuses—a merry, sturdier troop, all dressed in blues and yellows made out of a broader cloth than my lady's of the more delicate air.

How one loves January's few flowers! Later, the road to May's spring fair will be crowded with a gay throng, nosegays and garlands of a very pretty company. And the birds will join them. Some of them even now fly up to the tree-tops to get the first peep of the morning, climbing hand-over-fist up the dark, smooth sides of the eastern half of a mostly reluctant world.

"Lord, what a morning!" There's a blackbird living somewhere in the wood behind us: he has started every one of his days this past week with that ecstatic exclamation. There's been rain in plenty, but mostly when we all, the birds with the rest of us, were abed. Daybreak has usually presented a clear sky, swept spick and span by a wind that howled all night as if determined to have the job done in time for the sun to be

able to get to work in the morning. Such mornings as these wear a face as unnaturally clean as a small boy's. The night's heavy rain has washed out every particle of dirt deposited in the atmosphere by a busy domestic and industrial work-a-day world the day before. A hustling wind drives the begrimed air through this filter of cloud and rain to such good effect that the sun spreads her beams with all the sharp brilliance of a Sahara glare, the moment she gets over the skyline. So that even in January we are blessed with days when you "can't bear to look up at her." That's been so this week.

How the weather shapes and fashions one's moods! Give us just wind and sun, and we all want to be upon the move. We want to get up to some high place and look around and afar. From my windows, my mind's eye sets me clambering up to a bunch of spruce that sway and sigh on the top of a high hill within sight of the sea. Sometimes they pull me up to them. I leave my garden or my books, and, leaning against one of their tall, gently swinging trunks, drink in the view or give some impulse wider scope, in fancy. Such moments nourish queer beings who still seem to live deep down in most of us and who move only as shadows in and about the arches of our dim foundations, unable to find a way out of the human house built over them. And there are other shadows that choose such a moment as this to flit up the still unfinished stairways of the human house to snatch a peep of what may lie ahead. Few of us are as stern or as dull as we look to each other in the trains. And thank heaven for it!

A delightful day, one's feet able to walk this way and that in a field, while there is an almost unwarranted fore-

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taste of spring in the free air salting one's eager lips, and we begin to believe in ourselves again and feel a kindliness towards the other fellow. There is something jaunty about the movements of most of the creatures just now.

"It must be quiet to live in the country?" Sit on a stile and listen. There's an amazing stir of activity everywhere! And every now and again you can hear the crack of a new bud, opening because it has felt the glow of another year's pleasant sun feeling its way into the hedges.



A GREAT green woodpecker loping over the top of a maroon clump of dogwood set against a grey sky. The sort of thing you can never hope to see in July. One has to be out and about the lanes in January for that. One solitary leaf left over from autumn flutters at the end of the tallest dogwood shoot; a banner waving as the streak of winter beauty flashed by. You stand a moment or two wishing that it might all happen again. But a laughing note as the merry bird clambers into the boughs of a wild cherry tree, not long asleep, and you can reckon that the show is all over. It is, until your back is turned. Still, what you did see you applaud. It was a bit of England, at its loveliest, matchless anywhere. Of that a countryman, travelled as he may be, is prepared to vouch. But only to be seen in winter-time; and then a common enough sight.

Summer's country beauty is shy, wears its gay clothes a trifle self-consciously, fills the air with cosmetic aids and scents. The crowds have come out to look about them.

So June covers up her lovely shapes with leaves. But choose a moonlight night in January for peeps of Nature's witchery. I'd defy anyone to hold out against the charm of a young oak's bare limbs outstretched and spangled with frost or even snow. When the August holidays are on and the people tramp the lanes, the birds peep at them from behind foliage. As folks' feet crackle down the woodland paths, and the companionable stick pokes curiously down this hole and that, scuttling in the tousled undergrowth is all too often one's only intimation that there are bunnies about. It is now that you should tramp the country lanes. Winter, and a robin flushed with excitement, or a blackbird thrusting its amber beak up into your face, will meet you at every gate and fly away, only to let you through. Magpies, dressed in white waistcoats and "tails," will stand over you, chattering whilst you bend to pluck a precocious primrose bud or a red campion, the latter crimson with pride that at last it has been noticed nestling behind such a protective mass of red dead-nettle.

Feathery old-man's-beard, glistening with frost turned to dew, curtains off, but in a threadbare sort of way easy enough to see through, a rare activity among the tit family along quite a fair stretch of the hedge. You tug at a spray of honeysuckle—you'd have missed it had the brambles been in full leaf—and a black cloud of rooks rises from a preoccupied inspection of some fresh molecasts in the other field. Off they go, a brawling crowd of busybodies wondering whatever's come over the world that you, or me for that matter, should have taken to rambling and holiday-taking in mid-winter. Why couldn't we leave them alone? A rookery living's hard

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enough to come by when the ground is bound with frost without human nuisances also turning up with their uncertain intentions.

Yes, now is the time of the year to learn the true nature of the English countryside and find out who really lives there, and how. Never to have sat in front of a farmhouse fire, with dusk drawing in and tea-cups clinking in a preparative hustle, on one of those overcast afternoons in winter, is to have missed one of life's reasonably accessible felicities. For then hospitality rises to its best form at most farmhouses set a little off the usual road, or away up on the hillside, where fresh faces are few and far between.

"Mud! We're used to it. Get off what yo' can on that old scraper"—maybe a bit of worn-out scythe or a section of cart-wheel tyre—"and come right in. The men 'll be here d'rectly. They'll have done for t' day and, like enough, glad of a talk with someone." It's in winter that the farmyards are full. Choose a farm with plenty of straw about. The day's feeding finished, walk round again with the honest man whose job it is to leave every creature content and "bedded down." As you pass by the well-filled stalls, here a cow cud-ding again, happy with a new-born calf; there a sleek beast already down for the night; away in some dim shed the scuffle of pigs fighting over the last morsel, you call such a man prosperous.

Outside, a lamp bobs to and fro, a shepherd taking the last look round. New lambs are bleating. Nothing to worry about; the mother ewe has answered. A dog barks in the distance. Gradually the night settles down. The farmhouse smells as snug as the stalls the minute the door opens.

Logs make a world of difference. Gas-fires are all very well in a flat, but nothing comes up to a log. Bedtime may be an earlier affair than you are used to, but isn't one ready for it? Whitewashed walls and a rafted ceiling. A change that makes the holiday. A last look out of the window and how innocent the fields seem in their emptiness. How wise, how intimate the old moon feels, for one has to be in the country to "see" the moon. An owl hoots. Something's afoot. A shriek, and not so far from the window either. A weasel is making the most of the night's chances. A rabbit has paid a heavy price, venturing after the garden's cabbages. He counted on no triggers being pulled at that time of night..

Only just within earshot, a cock crows, misjudging the situation altogether just because a moonbeam lit up the perches and caused an odd hen or two to mutter crossly something about "the morning."

A night walk through the wood with a torch and you'd see much that a summer's night would take pains to hide from you. Then there'd be young about, but they would take some finding. Now, it wouldn't take much to find a pheasant or two, their beaks tucked into their neck feathers and so drugged with sleep that you'd make an easy capture, if you could be so mean. A crack of a twig, "out there somewhere," and the whole thing turns into a rare adventure. Few people have seen a fox. A dog fox betrays his whereabouts in January as mild as this has been, by barking in the vicinity of his lady-love's abode.

Morning's white frost as likely as not will change into gentle rain. But that shouldn't keep you in, or stop you walking on to the next place. A soft rain on the face,

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there's nothing more refreshing if there's no particular reason why you should be bothered to keep up appearances.

Folk on the road will be friendlier now than later. Work won't stop them handing over "the news." A farm labourer will talk to you over the hedge about all he knows of what's happening within ten miles, with all the assumptions of near neighbourliness. The men of the fields need to work less urgently in this month than in any other. With the men in the yards it's different; they have their hands full, though, in passing, they'll fling across a word or two or turn your quip into a joke. Mists will have come down into the tops of the trees not long after noon, but that only adds to their winter glory. Ash, beech and silver birch, there's not a doubt as to their identity. Set bare against the grey skyline, summer nor winter, church nor priest, neither hold out arms of more graceful benediction than the bare branches of winter's trees.

The day dies with the finches snipping the heads off groundsel for want of something better to do. But the robins are the last to turn in. The robins reign in January. Nothing matches their red breasts so well as a dull sky. I would live in the country in England in January, or come back to it then like an exile, if only to watch the robins and thrushes fussing and fluttering before bedtime, with the trees, the guardians of the birds, standing over them like sentinels caught in death. Yet more entrancing now in their winter glory than they will be even with the budding of spring.



SEVERAL little controversies are brewing in the farming world. Doubts are being cast on quite a lot of the notions that have held sway for over a century. "Just rubbing along" in the old ways is being challenged from within the industry as well as from without. Breeders in particular are getting some hard knocks. For a good many years now this country has been the home of at least fifteen different breeds of cattle, a similar number of sheep breeds, twelve kinds of pigs and even a half-dozen types of horses suitable for working the land. The queer thing is that most every breed and every type seems to have had no difficulty in finding wealthy patrons at all times prepared to set themselves up as their especial champions against all comers.

It's been an expensive business for most of them—very. But they must have a good deal of fun out of it, or else why did they do it? Thus, the pig with the long snout is taught to turn it up as high as it will go every time it meets a similar gentleman with a black skin or short snout in the show-ring. A lamb is just a lamb to a youngster, but flockmasters hold very definite views about the sort of sheep the land suits. As for cows, the black-and-white ones claimed the credit for being able to produce more milk than the rest. So a yellow-coated group were soon brought to the front, with demonstrable evidence that the milk they gave was at any rate of infinitely better quality. Their backers had only to point to the "cream-line" on the bottles to prove the contention. Then other cattle-breeders joined in the fray with the assertion that the dainty animals in their keeping could be relied upon to make both meat and milk at one and the same time.

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Scotsmen, however, refuse to believe in such an economic evangel. They prefer to stick to a hornless, shaggy-coated bullock or a roany shorthorn for beef and another more typical, coloury creature for the milk. One animal, one job, is evidently their farming motto. For some reason or other, Scotland is usually right about such farming matters. They haven't made the mistake about either pigs or sheep that makes such a tangle for the bacon factory or the wool merchant to straighten out in most of the farming districts in England and Wales.

That most breeds have something special to shout about can be admitted. But, except for a few, this is not special enough to keep large sections of the industry from getting down to the practical business of selling beef or bacon. The fact is that rich men's fancies have played havoc with the real fortunes of farming, in spite of the money they've spilled on their fashionable enterprises. For fashion has often been their only motive for the deal. Breed societies have as titled a directorate as a railway corporation, very often. And it's true, in all probability, that without them many an agricultural show would stop doing business. Not many tears would be shed, even did a few of these go. They're getting in each other's road a bit, and do the practical man but small good. Mere pedigree in cattle is in poor repute, a contemporary symptom all round.

Men with corns on their hands from holding plough-handles or tossing milk-churns about are nothing like as impressed as they once were by a bull coroneted with ancestry or the ribands of the show-ring. Times change views, even in farming minds.

An issue at the moment concerns horses. They're

literally splitting hairs about these handsome creatures. One popular breed is notable for the "feather," or wealth of hair, that decorates its weighty tread above the heels. A rival breed gets no points for such showiness about the legs, a fact that a ploughman East Anglia way will have few regrets about after a sticky day on stiff acres. Sound shoulders and heels are what mainly matter in a horse that's meant for work. A tired man scraping away at the clodded hairiness of a hairier "Boxer" or "Blossom," in the shadowy lamplight of winter early mornings or evenings, can be excused if he sometimes overlooks part of the job. And he's more likely to with horses of one well-known breed than with those of another. That is the argument. "Grease" in a horse's heels is a common malady, due in part to the persistent irritation of neglected soil on hairy legs. Some horsemen, however, protest that it is as hereditary as gout.

So a school of farmers has arisen, proud as ever of this breed, who are yet bent on breeding out its showy but offensive hairiness in legs. But will the boys of the old brigade countenance such tampering with the traditional lineaments of England's most famous breed of heavy horse? Not on your life; they're not listening to practical arguments. The commercial men also want lighter bone among other changes. There's "a demand" for lighter horses, combined with strength, for faster movement on the roads and kindlier treatment of the land. They'd like to get the business for their favourite breed. They'll get their way in the end. But many breeders are like mandarins—prepared to stand for pedigree against utility against all-comers, and despite the facts.



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THE sun spoiled the skating, once the easterly winds dropped. But the young cattle were glad enough about the change. It wasn't the cold they'd minded so much. With a whole haystack to pull at—for hay is cheap again at the moment; you can't sell any but the primest—lack of food was not their trouble. A week of tight frost and it's water that becomes the difficulty. The cattle "wintering" out, after a good tug at the hay, would wander off for the habitual drink. The first time they found the pond frozen over came as a bit of a shock. There wasn't one among them could remember the pond ever playing such a nasty trick on them before. They resented the whole business, demonstrated their annoyance by stamping and snorting, and then stood, disconsolate, as though waiting for an angel to come to trouble the waters. By the time an angel did put in an appearance, armed with an axe, quite a crowd had gathered. Starlings and rooks made a way for him. They bossed the whole proceedings. "Give the man room to swing his axe." One could hear them saying it as they insisted on the blackbirds and wagtails getting well back on the rails.

One old thrush, with her chin set down into her chest and her back up properly, refused to budge. She was thoroughly out-of-sorts. But after she'd "had a couple," she recovered her spirits amazingly. The man or woman who can find words fit to set to the music of a thrush's grateful thanks on such a bleak occasion is a poet. I find it beyond me to do so. A bird, speckled or black, as she swoops from one bough this side of the road to another bough the other with a shout of high glee as she does it, is as good a tonic as I ever meet with to and from my

work. The zest a living creature can work up out of a little water and a few earthworms! The thought of it always keeps me wondering.

Thank goodness this country doesn't freeze up for months at a time. We'd lose most of our small birds and a good many of our hedgerow inhabitants if it did. The sight of three field-mice drowned in a bucket inside our wash-house the other morning was a terrible shock. We're inured to the fate that must necessarily overtake the pantry mice from time to time. But field-mice must have been in a shocking state of desperation to have ended up in that way. The climb up the face of an enamel pail, sloping outwards from the bottom, represented an amazing feat of mountaineering, in my estimation. Unhappily, the water their long noses had led them to was still a few inches below the level of the top's rim. To cling to a slippery slope and at the same time hang head downwards to slake the torment of thirst had proved too desperate a venture. Their sacrifice was not in vain, though I dislike intensely the notion of putting the matter that way.

The children saw to it that a few pans of water were made accessible to creatures driven to such straits. Unfortunately, and to their great annoyance, the dog wouldn't enter into the spirit of the thing. "Mick" would either lap up or tip up the water he found set about so extravagantly everywhere. He behaved in such a way that, as one creature to another, he evidently thought it a lot of sentimental bosh on our part. He contemplated the three drowned field-mice with a disturbingly callous air. I had an uneasy feeling about it all somewhere, fundamentally. What he ought to have felt,

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to my mind, was, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Certainly, I thought, if every winter in Britain we froze up for months at a time like this, there'd be a lot less small wild life about our fields.

And in that case it wouldn't be half as interesting a place to live in as it is. I decided against ice and frost as I interred the three field-mice side by side. Snow might be a different matter.

Men with milk yields and contracts to keep up found things difficult, I'll warrant. A cow giving a couple of gallons of milk a day wants eight or ten gallons of water daily to wash the dry winter feeding down and keep up such a yield. And there are not a great many farms yet with water laid on. Ponds and streams still have to be depended upon to the larger extent. It must have been no joke keeping a waterhole going for fifty cows drinking twice a day, during the past week.

As for "firing," it was astonishing the way the stocks of wood laid by in the autumn diminished. In fact, it became quite amusing to see how, every mile or so along the country road, someone or other would be doing something about "a bit o' wood for the fires."

One old couple were working with a "cross-cut" saw that must have cut up a young forest in its time. To "cross-cut" properly is an art. There must be real understanding, a give and take on either side. If the other fellow can't, or won't, fit his stroke to yours, then the job is a toilsome one enough. You take to blaming that other fellow, throw out nasty hints about his lack of prowess, or even dare to suggest that he's never used a "cross-cut" in his life before. He probably feels the same about you. But where there is understanding, a

rhythm sets in and the stoutest log is sawn asunder in a space of minutes only. Both of you then stand over such a job and eye it with the utmost satisfaction. A "cross-cut" well used is a good tool, a most comradely implement to handle!



LOOKING after fifteen hundred acres of reasonably good farming land is a full-time job for a competent man in this country. With something like well over two square miles of countryside under his charge, a man can keep himself busy most of the days in a year. He'll have a herd of cows to manage, a flock of sheep, a dozen teams of horses, a fair number of poultry, besides any number of young cattle about, and the arable acres to keep in cultivation.

If he likes tractors, he'll have a couple about the place and do away with a certain number of the horses. But the man I'm going to write about has just done the other thing—given up the tractors and taken to horses again. "My men are better with horseflesh than with engines. I've found that out to m' cost. By the time you can get a spare part when you want one, the weather's broken up or you've finished the piece it was on with the horses. Most o' my men have bin with me since they left school, and I'd rather have them about than keep changin'." So he gave up the tractors. One of the old-fashioned sort, you'll say! But there are a lot like him in one part and another, just as there are more farming propositions of a thousand acres and over in Britain than most folk imagine.

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The other Sunday I took a walk round a farm, a big one, with its owner. He was a proud man of few words. We each took a knobbled stick out of the rack; he cast a glance down at my boots and, satisfied that I'd "got a sensible pair on," out we went. At the gate a pause to decide the direction. "Which would y' like to have a look at first, the cows or the sheep? The missus 'll show you the poultry after we get back. I don't know if you like cows or not, but that's them in the field yonder against the church. How far is it? Best part of a mile away. We keep 'em in the valley. Water is our trouble at times, and they gets plenty down there. Besides, the grass is more suitable for cows. They're turned out now more for exercise than for any grub they can find. I'll tell you what! Let's go up and have a run round the sheep first; we can have a look at the cows afterwards."

He never gave me a real chance to say which I preferred to do. He was off up the hill—and we never saw the cows in the end. I ventured, "You don't care much for cows evidently?" He answered, "I'd rather the sheep; I never fail to give 'em a look over twice a day, unless I'm ill, and that's rare."

"But surely," I said, stumbling over a molehill that he apologised for as if it was his fault that it was there, "the cows pay better than the sheep these days?" "I've lost money on m' sheep every year for the last five, but they're just beginning to pick it up again. I'm hoping they'll do better this. I've never lost faith in the flock." He'd nothing more to say about the cows; no tribute added for their timely milk cheques. For thirty-three years he had "lambled down," a different fold every season, "to prevent trouble." I saw the point, for

many a farmer thinks he saves himself "trouble" by keeping to the same sheltered corner year after year, only to foul the site with pests peculiar to sheep. "The last few years have been very awkward for farmers. And I've been hit as hard as most; I don't mind saying so. Times I've been worried so that I've hardly known which way to turn for money to carry on."

We'd had pheasant for lunch; so it was a tale hard to appreciate, especially on such a sunny day. Besides, there was the coppered glint of a cathedral spire in one direction and a twenty-mile sweep of shapely "Down" in the other. What he meant was that for a few years now he'd been "carrying-on," as he called it, by courtesy of the bank manager, like a good many more.

"So I've made a practice to come up here of a Sunday morning and have a look over the sheep. The wife usually makes for church. I was up here this morning. I find it does me more good than anything to stand among the flock for a bit and keep sort of looking 'em over and over. D'ye get what I mean?" Some folk like the feel of a dog's company at their heels when threshing things out, or, like another man I knew, find in the whinnied welcome of the stable most of their consolations for the gloomy day. This man found his amid the indifferent browsings of the sheep he'd bred.

The sheep-fold we came to was a hive of activities. The shepherd, "bin with me fifteen years," was masquerading a motherless lamb into the fleece of a still-born offspring, a trick of the trade, a deep deception to outwit the obstinate instincts of a bereaved mother. Spasms of sniffs at the borrowed fleece, and the shepherd's hope ran high that the highly suspicious foster-

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mother might lose her doubts and "take" to another's lamb. And not only for the lamb's sake, for a ewe that has lost its lamb will not, except in the rarest of instances, suffer another, undisguised, to suckle it. But a harassed shepherd has scant time to waste over a ewe's prejudices. All the same, he'd stand a good chance of losing her too, did he neglect to relieve the flush of her milk-flow.

The shepherd's own boy ("the family's been shepherding for centuries"), serving the truest mode of apprenticeship to as ancient a craft as there is for men to follow—the minding of sheep—was busy throwing turnips into a pen of happy families. "Doing well, don't you think? Soon be ready to turn out." The farmer watched the lambs' footballing antics with as much interest as I—he for the hundredth time, myself the first lot of this season's lambs I'd looked upon.

As I say, there was no time left for "a look round the cows." And for that matter for the poultry either. As his wife said, accepting my apologies for an apparent lack of concern in her interests as well, "his heart is in the sheep." And another thing I noticed, there were no children running about that house, nor had there been. Another reason why "his heart was in the sheep."



"WILD birds in cages." This headline, glanced at a week ago, has disturbed my complacency ever since. Quite eminent people, naturally enough, want to put an end to the traffic which now goes on in robin redbreasts, pied wagtails, golden plover, the wren

and the nightingale. Not long since I held a robin in my hand, about as common a little fellow as hops in and out country hedges. Sparrows prefer streets and town gutterings, except when the corn harvest is about. At least I hold that theory. I seem to detect a cockney accent in the tweets and twitterings of the squads of sparrows as they flit from stook to stook in the corn-time. But that robin in my hand—as finished a work of art and living creation as I could bring myself to conceive. There was nothing common about the blend of red breast with brown back, the sheen of the feathers, the slender adequacy of a pair of perfect feet, eyes proud but pitiful, uncertain of my intent. And to think that a dozen as coy, as delightful as this one, finding a livelihood there, spent their days blithely about our bit of a garden.

For there's not much of it after all. Just a few old apple trees, a maple in the corner, a couple of Irish yews watching over the gateway, and the rest more or less for cabbages. But there's enough to walk in—evening shadows reflected in a pond and a clear view, with not a roof in the way, that takes in every inch of the western sky. What am I driving at? Simply this, and the thought has been haunting me this week.

The folk who keep the kind of birds I live with every day in cages, who are they? Have they a garden to walk in? Does a nightingale ever sing under their window from a cherry-bough? Better gardeners than I shall ever be have, all too often, only a pair of window boxes for their garden. One hyacinth bulb nurtured to bloom with fragrance as the rarest gift that ever comes their way, a boon they feed on secretly. Souls, that in the dank air

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of slumdom might perish otherwise, watch a green shoot more ardently and more often than even the betting news. And that hyacinth bulb and racecourse favourite have this much in common—that a way of escape must be sought by the soul of man so long as there's any hope for him.

One doesn't count the mere trader in. The villain who snares the chaffinch may do so for no better reason than that he wants a few more pence to spend on a petticoat or a pint-pot. But it may as well be a source of livelihood, and he is driven to it much as most of us are to ours. He isn't so much the person that I have in mind. But he wouldn't come by his business without customers. I watched one of his customers once. Time had put aside the incident until the headline "Wild Birds in Cages" fetched it back again.

It was Sunday morning, and a youngish woman, blotched and battered by the drunken brawl of the night before, was leaning out of a top window, with folded arms across the sill, yelling out a few opinions about one or two neighbours evidently concerned in a somewhat runaway encounter with the police. She was still flying her "Jolly Roger." Hitched to the wall was just such a cage as the cheapest type of bird-fancier uses. And in it was a thrush. I was a lad then, in a mind that paid more regard to theological theories than to a thrush's notes. That particular day I was actually in a most exalted state of mind.

The sun got a beam across those bars. The speckled throat ran up and down its keyboard once or twice and then drowned the whole wretched business in a stream of song. "Lord! What's come over the bird? Just 'ark at

'im. 'Ark at 'im.'" We all did. A scowl crept over the girl's features. She began to push stray wisps of untidied hair a bit into place. She noticed me standing below, said nothing, but pulled the edges of a torn blouse across an exposed breast. The action was instinctive. She didn't do it on my account. Something was rebuking her; something else was making her shy. I don't remember ever having seen a thrush in a cage since. I feel now that if I did again I should stand in front of it and weep. I just couldn't bear it after ten years of these Sussex woods and lanes.

Yes, I suppose I'd stop the caging of wild birds if I could, but I have to confess it's not in my heart to condemn the folk who may stand in greater need of the songs and the companionship.



EVERY English county is defined as much by its own natural characteristics as by the official boundaries. Not even a stranger to our land could mistake Yorkshire for Lancashire! Norfolk is not Suffolk, and what it is that shades Hampshire into Wiltshire or Dorset is more "the lie" of the land and the ways of the folk thereabouts than any roadside indications of parish frontiers. Such distinctions exist without doubt almost county by county.

One can feel Surrey left behind on entering Sussex—certainly by road, and even by rail. Or is the latter only a fancy? Not to me. A ridge of hills can do it, or a belt of chalk or clay. Sometimes merely the width of a stream. Surrey is not Middlesex, metropolitan though

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they both may be. Kingston is not Hounslow, in spite of the multiple shops looking so alike, or the cinemas boosting the same films.

Without an inquiring word of a soul you cannot help knowing when Shropshire is reached by the old, beamed houses you see everywhere. And there is Cheshire with its ever-green grass.

Born near some well-known "shire" stones, as a boy it gave me joy to straddle the topmost stone and persuade myself that here was my chance to occupy three counties at one time. Or wandering up to a certain "Prospect Stile" that juts out from the Cotswolds' western edge, I would ruminate on the landmarks of a half-dozen shires—English and Welsh—in sight from this windy point. Later came the map to mark off each county traversed in holidaying or journeying as the years went by. It was a great day when Rutland was marked off—and not so very long ago either. And there is still a bit of the feeling left that it must be a distinction to be able to claim that one was "born and bred" in Rutland.

Northumberland was the last county to fall to me. That glorious run along her coast was quite a recent achievement, though it was hard to fit Newcastle and Berwick into the same outing. And as for Wales, there is yet Brecknock and Cardigan; Scotland, Ross and Cromarty. One must get to these places before long.

Such were the boyish dreams, and still they weave themselves into the stuff of manhood's jaunts and meanderings. Yet to have seen one's country end to end is to love it the more. This feeling is true, too, of each month of the English season round. Each has an

individual reputation. February can be as morose as November and as brisk as March almost in the one day.

Its ditches fill up with rains as suddenly as July's, but more unwelcome till we remember that wells and springs must accept this chance to replenish for next summer's needs. A little later on and a zestful Nature will intercept most of April's showers for spring-time sap and succulence, so that the wells get little or none then, and the streams begin to depend upon the winter soakage that neither wind, sun nor rootlet had either strength or need to bother about at the time.

February can be a tantalising month. A long spell of slack behind us just doing odd jobs in a time-filling sort of way, or a tiredness with routine amongst the stock, and we want to be on with the more invigorating tasks of field-work just ahead. Or to do as the gardening experts bid us, "plant now in some warm and sheltered spot."

One can get on to the land too soon, or at a job before it's fit, so maybe it's as well to have a wet day and a cold wind mixed up with the new sunshine in case March does get up to some of her well-known tricks, and gives us our work to do all over again.



MY word! but what a week! Did you notice that the worst of the fighting was down in the West, for fighting it was? Winter launched a mass attack on the enemy forces its keen eyes had sighted bearing down upon our green shores, their white sails blown out with warm airs straight from the Caribbean

THE SCENE IS ENGLAND

Sea. Spring, Winter's everlasting enemy, her soft arms full of the flowers already blooming on the islands of the sea, was making towards us. From the tops of the Grampians, the Pennines and the moaning peak of Snowdon, Winter had look-outs set, their lean fingers wetted for the first intimations of this gentle foe's advance.

There was something pent-up about the fury with which Winter's dark chariots tore down the steep sides of its fastnesses. When the heavens stage such a battle, man has still to keep out of the way. There's little he can do but hurry his sheep into the fold, or keep the huddled cattle going with hay. Snowflake and snowdrop are ancient adversaries, with forces they can summon to their aid as mighty as wind and tide, moon and sun, death and life, and neither of these has man mastered yet. To my mind there was a touch of the burlesque in the way the whole thing fizzled out. Yesterday, in my part of the world, that fussy old charwoman, Rain, in her tattered, muddied skirts of cloud, arrived to swill down the debris.

However bloodthirsty the Arctic gods Wodin and Thor may have felt when they blew down on us more pastoral folk a few days ago, old charwoman Rain has now got them scuttling away northwards again well in front of her broom by this time. Maybe they'll spend the summer licking their wounds, like bears hid amid the inaccessible crags.

But how the elements continue to make play with us! Three days ago, and the wold shepherd was seeking his snow-bound flock, with his knowledge of their habits alone to guide him. And now, to-day, the rising of the

rivers harasses the farm in the hollows below. Turbulent little streams, celebrating Spring's victory, are letting their ecstasies run away with them. Flood is more merciless than snow. It reaches out, inch by inch, until its clammy fingers have found the throat of a victim—the rabbit caught in a burrow, the sodden roof of which has fallen in; or the mole, absorbed in his enterprises, unable to turn back along a passage now closed to him. The horse even, in a frenzy perhaps but just as likely because he is such a fool about some things, forgets where the river-bank begins and ends, feels the soil slipping away from under him, and plunges in. The flood bears him on. He does little to help himself.

Wet winds are what the shepherd doesn't like. He loses more "mothers" than he cares to then, and a lot of lambs. Weather makes a deal of difference at lambing-time. "It can be as cold as y' like providing it be dry wi' it." One hasn't to forget that lambing is the shepherd's harvest-time. A bonus is his for every one of the newborn that lives to have its tail cut off. Shepherds are as prosaic about the means of livelihood as the rest of us. But there'll be a good many of them shaking their shrewd heads over this weather, I'll be bound. "It be a fair mix-up." That was Peter's verdict when he turned up at work yesterday morning. It be.



FROM a field-gate in the back country round Stradbroke in Suffolk I watched unseen awhile, a ploughman friend of mine at work. But before long he

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drew his team to a standstill on the headland against me with a "Wheigh there, Jinny, where're yo' agetten' to?" as Jinny swerved, catching sight of me opening the gate.

"How goes it, Sam?" I had known my man well. "Oh, a bit sticky yet, partik'ly on this class o' land!", casting a summarising sort of look sidewise round his shoulder at his finished work; then down to his boots. It was a stiffish loam, and he trod off first from one foot, then the other, more weight of gluey soil than that of his hobbled boots, heavy enough in themselves before the day was done.

Another man and team were further up the field drawing out the lands for Sam to finish later by balking the furrows into "stretches," leaving a draining furrow between each "stretch" to take off the surplus rains, operations calling for no ordinary skill. The horses steamed from the awkward, heavy going, and stood willingly enough while Sam asked after the doings of a wider world.

Years before I had lodged with Sam. "And how is the missus, Sam? Suppose her asthma gets no better?" "It can't so long as we have to go on livin' in the same hole," he answered, meaning a cottage backing the stable-yard. Sam has been much in my mind this week. The ploughs are on the go again for spring corn and roots, and such as he will be at work with team or tractor, however "depressed" the boss affirms things are.

A few fine days now and it's soon dry enough to harrow the molehills down and to tear up the moss and dead grass in the meadows, too. The old-fashioned

farmer prefers to drag bush or thorn faggots roped together and weighted down. Some use a tool of spiky tines, and others the chain harrow. Those advanced in such ideas encourage the growth of spring grass with the "discs," an implement running heavily on a number of cymbal-like metal plates, set on edge and serving as wheels. Drawn first one way then the other of a field, such revolving edges cut the mat of grass in squares, stimulating the severed rootlets to seek a new hold, so promoting their will to live more vigorously and abundantly.

The more forward farmers, especially on the lighter lands, will be on with the rolling, even of winter wheat heaved up by the action of recent winter frosts. Such men as Sam know as well how and when to do these things as many of their masters. So when the news stared me in the face that the farm wage for able-bodied workers in Suffolk was to be dropped from 30s. to 28s. I felt as grieved that farmers existed who could press their men so hardly as at the men's loss. These most honest of men, the farm-workers, deemed to be worth not so much even as the traditional "thirty pieces of silver." A betrayal, indeed, to my way of thinking, of wider consequence in the end than to any man's mere purse. If this paltry thing is done, Sam and his mate can be expected to ride their teams home after a day's real work in the fields, knowing their jobs to be of a kind someone must do if the rest of us are to live, but feeling in their hearts a little more bitter, and thinking how few of us really care, after all, how they fare.

For, make no mistake, the farm-worker does feel

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sorely these days his neglectedness and the apparent indifference of the rest of us.



THERE are wide stretches of countryside, even in England, that must look pretty much the same to-day under any sort of sky as they did a hundred years ago. But I have found my way back this week after a gap of only ten years to a corner of Essex changed beyond believing.

Not far from an old oak that figured in Domesday and is still to be found on the latest survey map of the district, there has grown up a town spread over a dozen fields that I last saw covered in beans and corn. A factory took the place of a farm, and the rest followed. Within five years the place has become important enough to warrant a bus service, a weekly newspaper and a "stores" that the women back as much for their pride in it as for any other reason.

But the same old stream twists and bends its unhurrying way to the not very distant sea. And the market town, not many miles farther down the road, looked as sleepy as ever on the Sunday morning I strolled round it. Ancient buildings flung long shadows across an empty market square. My footsteps echoed embarrassingly. An aged and robed verger peered round the porch for a moment at me, and then resumed his seat on a stone bench, worn surprisingly thin at the edge, presumably from the risings and sittings down again of a score or more of such sepulchral-looking beings. The church tower was a rich monument to time. It had four towerets, each with a golden weather-vane that gleamed

in the morning sun, fluttering simultaneously in a slight breeze from the east.

One thought of knights set on chargers with their gay pennants flying. And across the square a shuttered grocer's shop commended itself on the sole ground that it was "established in 1693." Such a town was evidently putting up a stout resistance to the demands of change and ideas. But one old woman said, "'Twas a good thing for the younger folk about the place that there was that factory at Silver End for them to go to for work. Of course, it meant a few miles on the cycle night and morning, but if it wasn't for that, they wouldn't be able to live about here for long. There was nothing much about this place to keep the young people.'"

I suppose so. And yet all round that town rolled fields, inert but rich with a simple wealth that may be won from them in the future by methods as up-to-date as any in vogue at "Silver End." And maybe then farming will be glad to make a place for the young people.

On my way back to a modern roof that enclosed every conceivable convenience, Jane and Mary, aged eleven and ten, showed me my first badger's "earth." Lucky for this pair of badgers that they have found such sanctuary—sanctuary that would be defended at almost all cost by these two new, delightful friends of mine. Many an application had my hosts turned only too willingly down to "dig" the badgers out. The gory possibilities of this "earth" whets hunting appetites pretty far afield, but they get little encouragement from these custodians of a perfectly delicious corner of Nature.

THE SCENE IS ENGLAND

Paths wind through brambled thickets down to a pond's edge where wild duck nest. Rabbits peep from the edge of bracken checked only by the regular mowing of a lawn. A score of forest trees dotted here and there complete a playground that would make the most of any child's day. The thought of the slums' squalor only a bare hour's travel away hurts. An intolerable fantasy that costs more to create and keep going for a single year than a sane community could spend on such simple available amenities as these under our feet and at the end of our fingers in a hundred years.

Crocus petals—white, yellow and mauve—lay on their backs in a lovely sun. Primroses burst their buds in clumps of crinkled green, pushing their way now with a determined air up through the sprawling roots of every kind of tree. From the hilltop where this pleasant property stands, yesterday's fresh ploughing glistens in the foreground of a landscape that pulls at the heart of an Englishman, whatever his creed.

What a land we could make of it!

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